



MARUKANE DEPARTMENT STORE

マルカネ百貨店



Less Than
LEGAL

A BNHA VIGILANTES ZINE

LESS THAN LEGAL IS A ZINE FEATURING THE CRAWLER, POP☆STEP, KNUCKLEDUSTER, AND STENDHAL - THE FOUR VIGILANTES OF THE BNHA SPIN-OFF SERIES: VIGILANTES. WHILE THESE FOUR AREN'T NECESSARILY HEROES, THEY FIND WAYS TO DO GOOD (OR, AT LEAST, SPREAD THEIR VISIONS) WITH THEIR QUIRKS. OPERATING BELOW THE LAW, THESE FOUR EXEMPLIFY THE NATURE OF A VIGILANTE, EVEN IN THE SMALL MOMENTS OF THEIR LIVES - WHATEVER "VIGILANTE" MAY MEAN TO THEM.



THE PRO HERO SYSTEM WAS FIRST PUT INTO PLACE IN RHODE ISLAND, U.S.A. UNDER THE "RHODE ISLAND NEW STATE STATUTE."



The Crawler



POP STEP



KNUCKLEDUSTER

189 VIGILANTES WERE AFFECTED BY THIS STATUTE, WITH ONLY 7 BEING ACCEPTED AS OFFICIAL HEROES.

NOWADAYS... **MOST** OF THE VIGILANTES HAVE VANISHED.

MODERATORS



Mel
mod stendhal

twitter:

○ yallmight

ao3:

○ surely_silly



Cary
mod popstep

twitter:

○ thishasbeencary

tumblr:

○ eraserhawks



Oxy
mod nice guy

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○ malaware_inc

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○ maLoxy



Lemon
mod knuckleduster

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○ lemOnferret

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AriaPMD Eol

tumblr:

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Honeyteacake

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EOkami

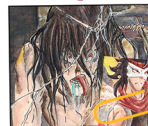
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Iffondrel

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Gavinom

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Kickingshoes

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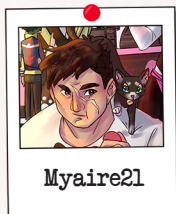
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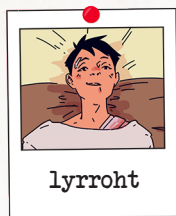
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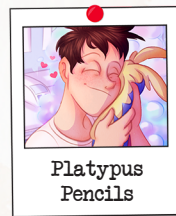
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- instagram:
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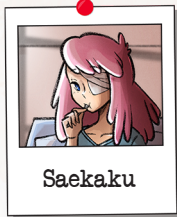
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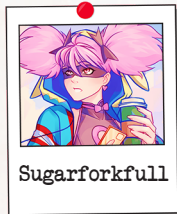
Saekaku

instagram:

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Sugarforkfull

twitter:

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instagram:

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Clothed-Daffodil

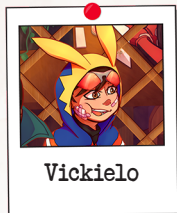
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Vickielo

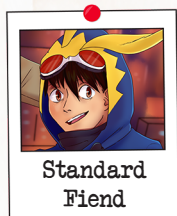
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Standard
Fiend

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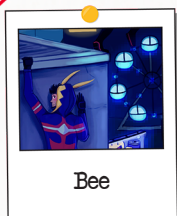
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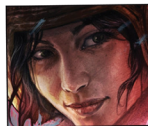
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81



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36



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ao3: starshipphoenix


95



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51



*all that we see or seem
(is but a dream within a dream)*

written by *Completist*
art collab by *iffondrel*

The Japanese Hero Billboard Chart is being revealed on live television.

Akaguro sits on the floor, the array of weapons he has amassed in the past couple of months glinting with the vivid colors from the TV. He glances at the television, judging the silhouette lineup of heroes, and decides that All Might is still the only true hero in this corrupt society.

Reaching for the whetstone to his right, he starts sharpening one of his knives—a gift from a master whose blood was spilled using the same knife. That master failed to understand his ideals, called them the crusade of a madman and refused to teach him anymore. No matter, Akaguro had learned enough from him.

Wind rattles the broken windows of the rundown apartment he's staying at, the television fizzling before stabilizing again. He wonders if All Might will be at this event. The smell of blood lingers with these weapons and no amount of sharpening nor honing has managed to remove it. It's either that, or the stench has taken to existing around him.

Akaguro smirks in time with the applause from the television, tongue moving as if to lick away the very taste of hypocrisy in the air.

He is less than half-way through his pile when Edgeshot is ranked number seven for the year. Akaguro takes a moment to watch him take his bow, takes a moment to judge his eyes and body language. It is truly a shame, for someone with such potential to bow to the whims of an unjust system.

The constant slashing of metal onto the whetstone is numbing. Soon enough, the sharp sound barely lets the comedy on the television cut through his senses. Akaguro has seen all these fake heroes flaunting their quirks like a badge.



Following the vigilante of Naruhata around for a couple of weeks proved useful in learning how true heroes operate. Knuckleduster's history sparked curiosity in him, but he respects the vigilante enough not to poke into places that don't need to meet the sharp end of his *katana*.

With methodical precision, he sharpens each dagger and knife, hones them with a steel bar, and then runs them through the whetstone again. He used to cut himself when doing this, used to lick the blood off of his own finger before trying again, and again, and *again*. Until he's got it all perfect, until he can do it half-awake, until he can use these weapons again to purge society of its sins.

A dagger flies through the room, past the television and into a board filled with newspaper clippings, photographs, and notes; it buries itself to the hilt through the wall, ruining the Number Two Hero's photograph.

Endeavor. Admirable, really. But he barely escaped Akaguro's list.

Once again, All Might is awarded as Japan's Number One Hero, and Akaguro

turns off the television seconds after All Might's remarkably short speech.



There are phantom pains that spark where his nose used to be. The memory of a strong fist hitting his mask and face, a memory that either feels distant or all too real.

He rubs the back of his hand over where his nose is supposed to be and half-expects blood to come off of it.



The media had a field day reporting his fourth target, two months later.

He's in Miyagi, shopping in a convenience store with air-conditioning that is so comforting in the middle of a sweltering summer day. The apartment he is temporarily renting has useless ventilation, but a little inconvenience is not enough to deter him. Not when there is still much to be done to reform this little town and its fledgling heroes

"An unknown assailant attacked one of the city's prime heroes... taken to the hospital almost an hour after the fight... no witnesses as to exactly when or how it happened... agency is yet to issue a statement regarding the state of..."

The cashier watches the television with interest, chin propped on the palm of their left hand. Akaguro sighs, throwing a couple of energy packs into his basket. The reporter continues, *"This may be a surprising turn of events, especially with the continuous decline of the crime rate in Japan these past few years with All Might as the Number One Hero, but the Hero Commission assures the public that heroes, together with the police, will always ensure and put your safety as their top prio—"*

He places the basket on the counter with a thud, snapping the cashier out of whatever trance the news report has put them into. Akaguro buries his face deeper behind the red scarf to hide his sneer at the mention of the Hero Commission. Sham heroes, sham commission...

"Kinda shocking, no?" His gaze flickers to them—some kind of mutation quirk, but still considerably young; might be working here as a part-time job, then. Small talk. Exhausting.

Akaguro shrugs, "What is?"

"That somebody is out here seemingly hell-bent on destroying heroes." The *beep!* of the machine stops for a brief moment as they look back to the television. "I mean, they're *heroes*. They save people, yet villains do this to them!"

Villains. Akaguro hums; he must be a villain then, to be the one willing and determined enough to rid this world of fake heroes and their vanity and their useless parade of powers.

"... pretty sure they can't do hero work anymore. And this one—" they jerk their head to the television— "my roommate said they're dead, and that their agency and the Hero Commission are just looking for the nicest way to say that to the public without creating panic."

"They would do that."

"I'm sorry?"

"I said 'they would do that.' Put the public's safety above all else." The words make bile rise to his throat. His gaze darts to the monitor for his total bill, and he's already placing cash on the counter while they continue to speak.

"Right, because that's what heroes do."

He hefts the bags onto his arms, irritation curling through his spine and blurring his vision. The public is too enamored by their heroes that they can't see how *fake* they all are—all of them except one.



Miyagi is cleansed a little over six weeks later. Akaguro feels adrenaline mixing with momentum in his veins and has to curb his enthusiasm. Not yet. Not too soon. He will have to treat this with care like he always does when he sharpens his blades. His momentary delight over the changes his actions have done must not hinder him from reaching goal.

He returns to Naruhata a couple of weeks after making sure everything has settled in Miyagi, and finds a foreign hero's face plastered almost everywhere. Frustration hits him in full-force, filling his veins with boiling heat. He spends an entire night sharpening his skills as his blades dull and crack.



The Crawler is helping an elderly woman cross the street a couple of meters before him. Akaguro wonders if, should he walk alongside them, the vigilante would remember him.



He spends the next few days building up his next mission. But, the thing with this mission is that he will need money.

The criminal underground—despite being disorganized for years—reeks with easy money and useful small talk. Even without his blades, a single night could earn him a fortune to fund his plans.

But the criminal underground can also be tasteless, bland, lacking; it often has his guts tugged like somebody is simply enjoying pulling the strings from above whenever it is convenient for them. Like the crime fighting arena from a couple years back that popped up and disappeared too easily.

Now, a *yakuza* is offering thick wads of cash to anyone willing to handle the logistics of whatever they are trying to bring in.

"It's not a hard job." Akaguro has to look down to meet their gaze—more aptly, to stare at the beak of their mask. "We just need you to bring in a box of goods from the port and then it's done. We just can't be bothered to fetch it ourselves, I mean—"

"What is it for?" The restlessness amuses him, but the mission is more important.

"It doesn't interest you—"

A man walks into the room, snapping a gloved hand that effectively stops the other's rambling in its tracks. He's wearing a mask similar to them, and Akaguro's hand twitches for his blade.

The plague mask muffles the words, but Akaguro hears them all the same. "Quirks."

"What about them?"

Akaguro hears him sigh, watches him scratch at the strip of skin uncovered by the mask. "They interest me. Can you do the job or not?"

"I can."



Akaguro delivers in two nights, as promised. He then cripples their ranks by interfering in a street deal a week later. Their leader—Overhaul—levels an entire street out of anger before escaping the incoming onslaught of heroes and police.

He laments their waste of determination, and decides to deal with them much later.



He sees Knuckleduster—angry and vengeful— leaving Naruhata at the same time as him. Akaguro wonders if he will have to deal with him any time soon.

The vigilante exits the train two stops earlier than him, and he looks back into the cabin as if feeling his gaze on him. Akaguro fixes his cap and feigns indifference by looking at his phone.

News of the success of one of All Might's non-profits fill the headlines, and Might Tower is set to hold a press conference later in the afternoon. Akaguro skims an article about the American hero who is set to establish an agency in Naruhata, raising his head only when the train begins moving and Knuckleduster has already left.



The Hero Commission paying him no mind makes his job a lot easier.

His first two targets go down easily. Too easily for heroes with almost a decade of experience under their belts. Akaguro loathes that he can still discern the taste of their blood on his tongue.

A week passes by before he approaches the third target; the death of the previous two 'heroes' caused unrest in the whole Chiba Prefecture, and he must tread these waters carefully if this whole mission is going to be a success.

He stalks the third target's patrol route for two nights, watches them stop a petty crime and a bank robbery—"heroics" that nearly bored him to death. On the third night, he brings all of his blades with him.

Endeavor is in the prefecture. Akaguro has no doubt the death of the two sham heroes brought him in the area; the Number Two did have a keen sense of sniffing out 'villainous' activities even at their fledgeling stage, no matter how fake he is. And Akaguro can admit that his mission is still young, still fresh; new enough that everything could go south with just one mistake.

Which is why everything has to be timed perfectly, executed with precision and pure determination.

The third target patrols their route from six to eleven in the evening, and passes by each of the three deserted back alleys once. Normally, he'd execute the ambush in the middle of the patrol, so he can just leave them to bleed to death.

But Endeavor's presence changes things, and All Might flying above at least four times in the span of two hours tethers things on an even steeper slope, steep enough that he is almost tempted to call things off for the night.

Nonetheless, he makes the ambush before the clock strikes nine, in one of the blind spots of the third back alley that smells of days-old garbage and dead rats.

A cat hisses then runs when his blade strikes the target. His first hit effectively immobilizes their hands, an essential tool in executing their quirk.

Light reaches the alley from a car passing by on the main road, and for a moment Akaguro sees fear cross his target's features in a light other than the moon. Thrill crawls through his spine at the sight.

He licks the blood on his blade, lips curling into an almost manic grin when the hero beneath him realizes they can no longer move.

"You—"

A cockroach skitters near his boots and he stomps on it as his target struggles to speak. He looks at the mouth of the alley, wondering if Endeavor is near, and then up, torn between wishing that All Might would pass again and not.

"You're the hero killer—"

Akaguro hums, his nose itching again. "Is that what they call me now?"

"—the one who killed those heroes." They suck in a deep breath as he twists the knife in their left arm.

"I'm also the one who injured the other sham heroes." Akaguro shivers in anticipation, seeing the exact moment the gravity of the situation hits the hero beneath him. "The word 'hero' has lost meaning, when the likes of you roam the streets just to get paid by the state. Standing tall despite lacking the creed, the *nature* of a true hero."

He pulls the dagger out of their arm, licks the blood off the blade for good measure. "This is why you will be culled."

"Please—"

"Bloodlust without conviction is meaningless. I will purge this society that reeks of corruption and is loitered by fakes."

"I have to go home for my daughter's birthday, please, my gift, don't stain—"

Silence rings in the alley, and Akaguro savours the moment before a skittering of movement catches his attention. Blood spreads into a pool beneath his boots, trailing and marking his footsteps as he approaches the intruder. Clouds part above; the blood dripping from his blades looks black beneath the moonlight.

Akaguro stops when he sees a child. A boy—no older than twelve—is staring at him with fear, hands trembling as he struggles to stand. Akaguro feels the moment his quirk loses its hold on the hero behind him, the very same instant they stop breathing. “This is not a place for children. Go.”

He leaves the scene after making sure the boy has left, even going as far as ensuring he gets home safely. Only to turn back half-way through when he realizes the boy is on his way to the police station.



The next morning, Akaguro picks up the newspaper on his way to the train station and finds the media unabashedly reporting about the Hero Killer: Stain. Following the description from a young boy of *blood red scarf and blades carried across the Hero Killer's body*, Akaguro is sure the media will eat this up for at least one week.

*THERE WILL BE NO FRAUDS WHO CAN STOP HIM; ONLY
THE TRUE HERO, AND THE SYMBOL OF PEACE.*

He passes by Ingenium's truck, sees the hero talking grimly with Endeavor, and makes a mental note of looking through the Turbo Hero's career once he's back in Naruhata.



Dinner is composed of curry and rice, along with cold soba noodles, and a tall glass of a protein shake. The evening news is reporting the event held earlier today as a collaboration between the Japanese and American heroes, headed by a flashy hero called Captain Celebrity.

Akaguro takes one look at him and frowns. Another fraud.

He is halfway through his dinner when he sees the clip of All Might catching the Tokyo Sky Egg from falling. The recorded screams pierce the silence of his apartment, the frantic reporting of the newscaster on-site grating on his nerves.

But, *oh*, the way All Might swoops in to catch the falling Sky Egg has the hairs on his arm and neck raising.

That night, he spends the whole time the news airs in rapt attention. He eats his dinner slowly, savoring the flavors of his food as the broadcast continues to cover the incident earlier today.

All Might gave a brief interview after shaking hands with the American Hero. Nothing much. But it was perfect.

His activities in Miyagi were briefly covered; nothing too intensive since everyone is still reeling from the shock of today's events along with being too enamored with the Number One.

When the evening news goes off-air, Akaguro moves to fill his board with plans once again. He stays up until the following morning, planning and memorizing his routes. He plans for the next couple of years; he plans his steps from Chiba, to Osaka, until Hosu City. Today's events and the thrill of his work juxtaposed with All Might's burned the flame in him even higher. There will be no frauds who can stop him; only the true hero, and the Symbol of Peace.

At dawn, he burns everything related to himself and his mission. He begins to sharpen his blades, just as the city comes to life once more.











UNOFFICIAL MENTORS

written by *Deafmic*
art collab by *gavinom*

Before anyone else, Koichi learned from Eraserhead.

Eraserhead made no secret of his real identity. Aizawa Shouta, a quiet and solitude man who worked as an underground hero, who Koichi often saw around his district, helping out wherever he could with whatever he could. He was a strange man, Koichi always thought, even from the first moment he'd met him. Always with an air of aloofness, of uncaringness, all of it hiding a heart of gold that Koichi knew was there. It was obvious just from being around him for more than five minutes.

And eventually, it was obvious from the way Aizawa interacted with him. Aizawa cared in a way that he always hid beneath his stoic facade. Because if he didn't, then why would he even offer to help?

"You move around like an elephant."

Koichi nearly jumped out of his skin the moment Aizawa spoke and materialized out of the shadows behind him. Koichi had been out, doing anything he could as a vigilante, and had been chasing down a small time villain when he'd lost track of him back here, in an alleyway behind a tall set of buildings.

Except now, Koichi could see that he hadn't lost track of him at all. No, the villain was sitting on the ground, gagged and bound with Eraser's capture weapon, expertly tied and immobilized, all in the span of a few seconds. Koichi's capture had essentially been yanked out from under his fingertips, but he couldn't even begin to care, because of the fact that Eraser had so expertly taken the villain down, and all Koichi could do was stare with wide eyes.

Suddenly, he remembered that what he was doing was illegal and he'd just been caught by a hero, a hero who was currently looking him up and down with narrowed, critical eyes. Koichi put up his hands, managing a wobbly smile, and went for his usual denial. "E—Eraser! I was just... out for a midnight walk! Not chasing down that villain or anything. Nope, I've never seen him in my life!"

He was awfully glad that villain was gagged, because Koichi could *feel* the way he was glaring at him, as if to call him out on his obvious lying.

Eraser just raised an eyebrow. "I didn't see anything, but I did hear you. You need to be quieter, if you ever want to pass as anything close to a hero."

Koichi rubbed at the back of his neck, the wobbly smile falling off his face. It was true that he hadn't been paying much attention to the noise his feet were making, but at the same time, he hadn't thought he was being that loud. He would've asked why it mattered, if it wasn't obvious that Eraser had taken down this villain by moving silently through the shadows.

"It's just a little hard," he admitted quietly, glancing away, out to the mouth of the alleyway where Koichi could see the occasional car passing by. "I don't have any formal training or anything."

He looked back at Aizawa and Koichi thought he saw something flicker in his face. Something almost like sympathy. Koichi hadn't been expecting it but... maybe Eraser was the one who'd understand the most. Underground heroes were, after all, just a step above being vigilantes themselves. Aizawa was about the closest thing Koichi had to another vigilante, besides Pop and Knuckleduster. Maybe he would understand.

Aizawa glanced at his wrist, where Koichi could see the glint of a wristwatch. He frowned, looking back at Koichi, "We've got some time before the police get here. I'll show you how to be quiet, but only so you stop making such a racket and disturbing everyone around here."

A wide, happy smile blossomed over Koichi's features. He didn't even hesitate, his voice picking up in volume, "Yes, yes, teach me!"

Aizawa cringed at his volume, "Lesson one: don't be loud. Got it?"

Koichi quieted, but continued grinning. "Got it."



Kazuho met Mirko unexpectedly.

She happened to be in the right place at the right time. Scouting around with Koichi initially, but the two of them had split up for vigilante work, taking separate sides of the district they were in. That was how she—quite literally—bumped into Mirko.

“Oi, your costume looks like mine!”

The exclamation surprised her, as Kazuho had fallen back, landing on her partially bare bottom and hissing as the gravel stuck into her skin. She rubbed at her thighs, internally cursing her clumsiness that was chronic whenever she didn’t have her glasses on, but it wasn’t until she heard the voice that she looked up to see the woman she’d run into.

*MAYBE SHE'D ACTUALLY FALLEN ON HER HEAD AND
WAS SUFFERING SOME SORT OF HALLUCINATION.*

She recognized her immediately.

“You’re—”

Kazuho’s voice caught in her throat and she nearly choked. Mirko! Right here, in the flesh, standing right before her! The woman who was slated to become one of the top ten heroes in the country! Standing right here! And shit, she’d totally just ran into her, having not seen her in the shadows. Was Kazuho intruding on her territory? She’d better get out of here before she snapped or something—

Mirko smiled brightly at her, grinning her signature smirking smile, just like Kazuho had seen in magazines and on TV. She’d never imagined that she’d see it up close and personal, and definitely not *this* up close and personal. She took a step back, her face heating up and suddenly, Kazuho felt like she was out of costume again, turned back into the shy girl she was on a daily basis.

“Mirko,” Mirko finished for her, pointing at herself and then at Kazuho, “And you are...? New hero? This is usually where I patrol, you know.”

Kazuho swallowed hard, her worst fears coming true. She really was intruding on a hero's territory. That was the very last thing she'd wanted to do. She managed a stuttering response, feeling more and more like the unconfident girl she was out of costume, "N—No, just..."

"Oh," Mirko said before she could finish, smirking just a little bit wider. There was a flash in her red eyes, a flash that initially made Kazuho's blood run cold. But Mirko didn't snap at her or anything. Instead, her voice was filled with an odd sense of understanding, "You're a *vigilante*. I see it now. The showy costume. The whole being unknown thing. The fact that I could hear you from a mile away."

Kazuho's body was ice cold by now. "Please don't turn me in!"

Mirko's smile faltered, but only for a moment, only to fall into a contemplative look as she studied Kazuho. She shook her head slowly, "Why would I do that? The world needs more heroes, stupid licenses be damned. I was something like you once, anyways." She brightened up, grinning again suddenly. "Show me your quirk."

"My—My quirk?!" Kazuho couldn't believe her ears. Not only was Mirko—the up and coming, almost top ten Bunny Hero Mirko—not going to turn her in, but she was asking to see her quirk? She had to be dreaming. Maybe she'd actually fallen on her head and was suffering some sort of hallucination.

"Your quirk," Mirko confirmed with a nod of her head, like it was the simplest thing in the world. "Show me."

So without more hesitation, she did. If Mirko wasn't going to turn her in for illegal vigilantism, then the least she could do was show her quirk off. Kazuho backed up, putting a little bit of distance between herself and the popular hero. Then she ran, gaining speed with each step until finally, after what felt like forever under the watchful gaze of another hero, Kazuho thrust one foot in front of the other and *bounced*. She took off immediately, her quirk activating, sending her high, high, high up into the air. She sailed to the tops of the nearby buildings, controlling it easily after so much practice, and only once she was at her tallest height did she allow herself the smallest of smiles.

As she came down, Mirko whistled and to Kazuho's surprise, clapped like she was applauding some great feat of another (legitimate) hero.

"That's a decent quirk you've got there," Mirkuo told her with that toothy grin. "But, you know, I think I can give you some tips to jump even higher. It's not just our costumes that are similar. Watch."



Mirko did the same thing Kazuho had, backing up and then running, before taking off, soaring high into the sky in only a single jump. Higher even than Kazuho herself. She watched in amazement from the ground, until Mirko bounced back to the ground, taking several smaller bunny hops to get back to Kazuho.

"Teach me that!" Kazuho demanded, immediately forgetting all her previous anxieties over talking to the popular hero. Now, all she could see was that *jump*, that beautiful high jump and the subsequent smooth landing. Mirko was deserving of her rank and all Kazuho wanted was to learn that move from her.

Mirko just laughed, "I guess I have some time. Look, copy what I'm doing here with my legs and..."



Koichi actually met Fat Gum through Eraser.

"F—Fat Gum," was—stupidly—the first thing out of Koichi's mouth when he saw the large man just casually sitting in the Hotta Brothers' soon-to-be-cafe with their very own neighborhood hero, Eraserhead, who was busy feigning sleep in one of the chairs opposite Fat Gum. Koichi recognized the man instantly—it was hard *not* to. The man was so distinct, with his large body and his huge smiles that rivaled only All Might's, as well as his bright orange costume. Of course, Koichi had seen him before. Many times. All over the news, even on magazines and in newspapers.

"Who's this little budding hero?" He was wearing that huge grin on his face, glancing at Eraser as he leaned against the wall, faking like he was asleep. "Someone who shouldn't be here," Koichi heard Eraser mumble without even having to open his eyes. Koichi's face burned, but he didn't back away, didn't back down. Even with all the heroes he'd met lately, he knew that this was another once in a lifetime chance and he wasn't about to squander it just out of embarrassment.

"The Crawler, Sir—"

"Cobbler," Eraser muttered, miraculously still awake.

"Crawler," Koichi said again with a shaky smile as he took a few nervous steps towards the pair sitting at the makeshift table. Fat Gum sipped coffee from a cup one of the Hottas had brought for him, while Eraser's sat empty next to him, the man still leaning against the wall with his eyes closed like it

was the perfect time for a nap.

"The Crawler!" Fat Gum laughed, his voice bellowing and echoing. For a moment, Koichi was terrified that he was being laughed *at*. With the amount of times people messed up his vigilante name constantly, it was only natural for Koichi to feel a little self-conscious of it. Those feelings were squashed almost immediately, though, when Fat Gum, still laughing, exclaimed, "What a great hero name! You must be fresh out of hero school, kiddo! Which one did 'ya graduate from?"

"I—" After all this time, Koichi still hadn't quite figured out how to explain to heroes that he was a vigilante, not an actual hero. After all, vigilantism was completely illegal, and not all heroes were quite as 'nice' as Eraserhead was when it came to letting him run around as a vigilante.

He didn't have to figure it out, though, because Eraser cracked an eye open, looking at his colleague with a tired gaze, and raised his eyebrow, "The Curdler here is a neighborhood vigilante."

To Koichi's surprise, Fat Gum didn't immediately recoil. There was a look of surprise, widening of his already huge eyes, mouth dropping open in momentary shock.

"Well then," Fat Gum declared, another huge smile blossoming across his face. That smile immediately brought Koichi comfort and relief, relief that the hero hadn't immediately been disgusted with him for his vigilantism. He really should've expected this, Koichi thought. Of course Eraser would hang around with like-minded heroes. But what he said next came as even more of a shock to him— "Come 'ere! Show me that vigilante smile of yours! I bet Eraser here hasn't taught you anything about that—any hero, even a vigilante has to have an award-winning smile. Like this!"

To get his point across, Fat Gum pointed at the smile that stretched across his entire face, lighting up the entire world around them. His grin put Koichi at even more ease, making him relax. Even Eraser, now awake and staring at the both of them, seemed to soften around the edges seeing it. Fat Gum's grin was truly his most defining feature, over his size and the brightness of his costume and over everything else, and Koichi knew right then *exactly* what he was talking about. A hero's power laid in their smile.

"Teach me!" Koichi immediately burst out, wanting nothing more than to learn how to brighten up the entire world with just a smile like that. If a hero's power laid in their smile, then Koichi had to work on his.

"I'll teach you how to smile better than even All Might!" Fat Gum laughed

as Koichi approached him, taking a seat next to him at their table. The hero glanced at Eraser, grinning impossibly wider, "You too, Eraser! You could really use some work on that smile of yours... not that I've ever actually seen you smile!"

"Just leave me out of this," Eraser mumbled, laying his head back on the wall, though not before he shot a pointed look at Koichi, clearly blaming him for this entire ordeal.

Despite himself, Koichi just laughed.



"How'd you get so good at this?"

Kazuho asked as she walked alongside Kayama Nemuri one night, after tagging along with her for yet another undercover mission, this one ending up significantly less disgusting than the last one had, much to Kazuho's relief. She stumbled a bit in the darkness, keeping an eye on the much older woman as she walked, having a little bit of trouble finding her way without her glasses. She reached up, adjusting the black wig that sat on her head, tilting her head up to look up at Nemuri, as the two of them passed underneath a streetlight.

"Going undercover is an art few have mastered, Pop," Nemuri looked down at Kazuho's hunched over form, shooting her a wink as the light from the streetlight lit up her face. She wore heavy makeup, much different from her usual, and a short blonde wig, looking almost nothing like the woman Kazuho knew. That was a staple of going undercover, she supposed. Kazuho just wondered if she'd pulled it off herself, or if she even *could*, because when she looked in the mirror, she just looked like herself with black hair and no glasses.

"I just wish I knew," Kazuho lamented, staring at her reflection in the dark storefront windows as they passed through. "I feel like I'm just myself... in a costume. Not even a Pop Step costume. But just me. Kazuho."

Nemuri slowed down a bit, fixing Kazuho with a stare. Her normally ice blue eyes were colored green with contacts, complimenting her short blonde hair. Kazuho thought she looked nothing like herself, like she'd put on a whole new persona with her undercover costume. She wasn't just wearing a costume. She was someone else completely. How did she even begin to pull something like that off? It just didn't make sense to Kazuho, who looked like nothing more than her usual hunched-over self in a wig. She looked more

different than this when she was wearing her vigilante costume, and even then she still sort of looked like herself.

"It just takes practice," Nemuri told her in a voice quieter than usual. She paused, but reached over, putting a hand on Kazuho's head and gently ruffling the wig hair. Kazuho stared up at her, letting out a small sigh of relief. Nemuri smiled at her softly. "Don't worry. You'll get it. Just keep coming on missions with me and you'll get the hang of it. You can be my little undercover partner."

Somehow, Kazuho believed her. She gave a small smile back, though it was a little shaky, and nodded. "I'd like that, I think."

"You think?" Nemuri raised a playful eyebrow at her. "Have some confidence, Kazu-chan."

"I *know* I'd like that," Kazuho corrected herself, doubling down and trying to fake some confidence—and to her surprise, some actual, real confidence came with it.



"Don't you think it's odd?"

Koichi and Kazuho walked together one afternoon, the cold wind tugging at their new matching winter scarves. Winter was coming, soon to be in full swing, and it was obvious in the air around them. Kazuho had just finished telling Koichi about her latest escapade with Midnight and the undercover mission she'd taken her on. In return, Koichi had told her all about meeting Fat Gum and the smiling lessons he'd given Koichi. They did this often, swapping stories about the heroes they met, walking together and talking, planning out their vigilante nights in the process.

"The fact that we meet all these heroes?" Koichi responded, glancing down at Kazuho as they neared the train station they were headed to, preparing to take the train to a different district for their plans tonight. After all, it wasn't good to break the law all the time in the same place. Koichi thought for a moment, taking a bite of the bun in his hands. "I guess so. Who knows who we'll run into next."

Kazuho grinned, copying the way Mirko smiled in the small training session she'd given her. She tilted her head up, giving Koichi her full attention as she smiled, her voice picking up a little as she spoke, "Yeah, maybe we'll run into All Might or something next."

What happened next really was her own fault.

She wasn't looking where she was going at all, instead staring up at Koichi. She'd completely ignored what was in front of her and just then, a man stumbled out onto the sidewalk, right at the time Kazuho and Koichi were both distracted, and at that very moment, they collided, Kazuho and Koichi crashing into the man in a flurry of exclamations and apologies that soon followed.

They both found themselves sprawled on the concrete sidewalk, a little scraped up from the impact, and staring at a tall, thin and gangly blonde man, who wore a hairstyle of two long pieces framing his face and the rest in a short, wild style behind. He was tall, huge and stick-thin, wearing a red, white, and blue business suit and carrying a bunch of papers that scattered on the ground at the impact.

"We're so sorry!" Koichi quickly supplied, scrambling to pick up the man's papers. Kazuho followed, snapping out of her daze to do the same.

Just then, another man called out from behind them, running up to them and coming to a stop. "Yagi-san, hurry, we have to get to the conference. The commission won't like it if we're late again."

The commission? He must be important. It was on both Koichi and Kazuho's minds, but neither one of them could place who this man was, even when he seemed so completely familiar to both of them. They gathered the man's papers and pushed them back at him, the man smiling sheepishly in a way that seemed to light up the air around them.

"Sorry about that," he said in an equally familiar voice. "I really have to get going, but please don't worry about running into me."

Just like that, the man was off, disappearing with the other man flanking him, leaving Kazuho and Koichi behind. The two of them slowly brushed themselves off and stood up, staring after the man who'd just left, both of them mentally trying to place who it was that they'd—quite literally—just ran into.

"Weird," Kochi said with a nod in the direction the man had disappeared into.

"Tell me about it." Kazuho shrugged, pushing it out of her mind as she looked up at Koichi again. "Anyways, what would you even do if we ran into All Might...?"



GhostiniMartini
2021



LIVE

"You're next."







OFF TO THE RACES

written by *DrAphra*
art collab by *KickingShoes*

Sunlight glares down on the packed streets of Naruhata while people celebrate the festival-like air surrounding the Race for Quirk Equality. Booths have been set up at the race checkpoints, and people gather to cheer on their friends, family, and - of course - the heroes representing the cause.

Outside the IDATEN PIT01 truck, Iida Tensei flexes his calves and stretches his neck in preparation for the run. He and most of his mobility-type sidekicks wear matching blue t-shirts with the IDATEN logo emblazoned across them, all of them having volunteered in order to raise money for quirk discrimination awareness. Tensei grins at the sight, proud of his team in more ways than one.

As much fun as racing my sidekicks is, though, I wish my jogging buddy was here.

It was a shame Koichi hadn't responded to Tensei's invite. After all, the vigilante and his oft-laughed-at quirk had been the main inspiration for Tensei to sponsor the event. That, and the fact that Tensei could never turn down a good old-fashioned race.

"Iida-san!" Enigma calls from the truck. "It looks like they're gonna be lining up the sponsors of the race soon. Better make it up to the front!"

"Will do!" Tensei calls back, waving at his sidekick before jogging toward the massive blow-up gateway marking the starting line.

A couple of other heroes wave at him - some Tensei recognizes, some he doesn't - and he grins and calls greetings back.

"Don't make us look too bad, Iida-kun," Vlad King jokes, punching Tensei in

the shoulder. The engine hero grins.

"Couldn't make a handsome man like you look bad if I tried, Vlad," he laughs. "But I won't lie - I hope you came here hungry, because I fully plan to make you eat my dust."

Laughter echoes around the starting line, and camera crews rush up to catch the tail-end of the merriment, eager to get their stories in before the race begins.

Overhead, an enormous digital clock counts down.

1:00

0:59

0:58

0:57...



Much *further* overhead, Takami Keigo coasts on a lazy current, gazing down at the milling streets below. People are an amorphous blob from this high up, and Keigo cocks his head as he tries to determine what all the hubbub is about, while a fast-paced pop song pounds into his eardrums.

He supposes he *could* just Google "Naruhata Events Today", but he's pretty sure the Commission monitors his search history (a nightmare, really), and he doesn't want them to know he's playing semi-hookie.

"Oh?" he murmurs to himself, his sharp eyes catching sight of something *interesting* down below. A tiny speck chasing another tiny speck through a side alley, heading toward the blob-crowd. Moving pretty damn fast, actually.

Can't be as fast as me, though, Keigo thinks, stroking his chin as he watches the game of chase below.

Right?

One of them puts on a spurt of speed, and Keigo's eyes narrow.

One way to find out.



Sweat pours down Koichi's back under his All Might hoodie as he slides through the narrow streets of Naruhata. His fingers tense against his gloves as he takes a tight corner, fighting to keep the dark figure ahead of him in his sights.

"Stop!" he yells at the guy, whose annoying cackle echoes against the dense buildings.

"Make me, skid-mark!" the guy yells back, waving a snatched purse over his head tauntingly while he surges forward on another burst of speed, kicking up dust in his wake like some kind of cartoon.

Gritting his teeth, Koichi ratchets up his own speed, privately wishing he hadn't sucked down so much bubble tea earlier. His guts squirm as he swerves around another dizzying corner and he squints over his mask against the sensation.

Thief guy seems not to suffer from boba-related bowel issues, and happily hops a couple overturned trash cans in his flight. Koichi takes the wall route and groans as the world tips sideways.

*Why did Iida-san pick **today** of all days to skip our morning jog? He could snatch this guy no problem, Koichi thinks miserably, following the sounds of hysterical laughter up ahead. And why did I choose today of all days to forget my phone??*

"Slow down, you thief!" he hollers at the speedy ne'er-do-well, his roiling guts distracting him from the noise up ahead.

At least, until he bursts from the end of the alley into an enormous crowd.



Tensei turns sharply when cries of distress swell behind him, only to see people diving out of the way as something rockets through the crowd. Immediately, his engines rev as he braces to intervene.

Before he can move, someone careens through the throng at high speed, jetting by Tensei with only a cackle on the wind to mark his passing.

Which leaves the hero blinking in astonishment for a moment — it's been a *helluva* long time since someone was able to outpace him.

"Stop, thief!" a familiar voice hollers. Tensei blinks once more as a familiar form in an All Might hoodie slides through the crowd in hot pursuit.

"Ko—Crawler?" he says, before the situation registers. His eyes flick to the person who'd just passed him, then to Koichi, sliding his way, and it clicks.

"Iida!!" Koichi yelps, nearly crashing into some lady's legs as he propels through the last of the crowd. "Stop that guy!"

Tensei nods. "Vlad, delay the race!" he calls to the hero, turning on his heel just as Koichi reaches his side. "Crawler, with me!"

Then the gunshot signaling the beginning of the event goes off, and the announcers bellow over the loudspeakers.

"LOOKS LIKE SOME OF THE RACERS ARE GETTING STARTED EARLY, EVERYONE!"



Koichi's fingers ache and his left calf is threatening to cramp, so it's with happy-tear-worthy relief that he sees Iida racing alongside him in pursuit of the purse snatcher. It means that if Koichi stumbles, the hero will be able to pick up the baton.

The stampede of heroes and civilians just behind them, though, is concerning.

"What's going on?!" he shouts over the wind as they fly down the streets, appearing to be cleared for some kind of event.

"Race day!" Iida calls back, his feet blurring against the asphalt. "Tried to text you!"

"I forgot my phone at Pop's apartment!"

Iida trips, almost eating blacktop, and Koichi, realizing how that sounds, lifts a hand to vigorously deny whatever the engine hero is thinking, promptly sending himself into a tail-spin.

The hero catches him by his hoodie without missing a beat, and drags the

slidester behind him while Koichi regains his balance.

"Not like that!" Koichi manages, hoping that the ripping noise he heard was, you know, anything other than his precious jacket, while trying desperately not to lose his boba.

"If you say so!" lida swerves around a corner, and Koichi slides alongside him like a slippery sidecar, barely catching a glimpse of the thief ahead of them on the makeshift track. "What's up with this guy?!"

"Purse snatcher!"

"Why is he so fast?!"

"I don't know!"

"Got any ideas!?"

"No! You?"

lida's engines make a coughing noise and spit out a puff of black smoke that looks distinctly Not Good. Koichi sees the engine hero make a face.

An ominous sense of foreboding washes over him.

"Yeah!" Tensei says. "But you're not gonna like it!"



Watching all of this unfold from above, Keigo can't help the grin stretching his face. Not only because there's a race going on, but because he can actually feel the strain in his wings as he follows overhead.

So worth playing hookie for, he thinks as he swoops closer, wind whipping his hair against his cheeks so hard he can feel the sting. Hell, he's never had the chance to let loose like this outside of training before and it feels *great*.

Below him, he spies the two pursuers. One of them is definitely Ingenium, and the other — an All Might cosplayer? — is being dragged behind the Engine Hero at high speed toward — toward —

"Oh." Keigo's bushy eyebrows fly up into his hairline.

"Oh, *shit*."



"IIDAAAAAAAAA!!!!" Koichi yells as Iida rockets them towards a ramp that's inexplicably paralleling the track. What it's doing there, he has no idea, but Iida's barreling at it and hauling Koichi behind him with terrifying intent, and—

"Don't worry! Tested it out earlier!" Tensei hollers back. "Supposed to be for stunts, but if you don't have any resistance — !"

Koichi understands that. He does. The ground drags at his propulsion and makes him slower than when he's rebounding through the air. He'll definitely catch up faster going through the sky than on the ground.

Still!

*EXCEPT... EXCEPT HIS LIFE HAD NEVER INCLUDED A
TEENAGE-LOOKING ANGEL-MAN BEFORE.*

"You ready?!"

"NO!"

"Good!"

And then, Koichi is being spun in a tight circle before getting launched full force at, up, and off the ramp, high into the air.

Self-preservation kicks in and Koichi practically jettisons himself skyward with his propulsion, terrified of looking down and seeing the speck that Tensei has become below him. His stomach churns, his palms sweat profusely, and he's pretty sure he can see his life flashing before his eyes.

Except... except his life had never included a teenage-looking angel-man before.

"Yo!" angel-man says jauntily, red wings flapping vigorously at his back. "You likin' the weather up here?"

So many questions, so not enough air in lungs to ask them. Koichi kind of gargles at the guy and hopes he gets the message.

Angel-man laughs. "Introductions later, got it. Think that's your tag buddy down below, by the way." The guy points, and instinctively, Koichi follows his finger.

Far, *far* below, he can make out the speck that is the purse snatcher. And though Koichi will never admit to it, he can see that he's definitely gained on the guy with lida's insane move.

lida, Koichi can see, is speeding down a side street, aiming to head the thief off. His watering eyes widen as he realizes the hero's plan.

Still insane! But also really smart. Trust a pro to come up with something so wily.

Angel-man seems to understand the plan, too, and his face breaks out into a wide grin.

"Mind if I lend a wing?"



Tensei blasts through alleyway after alleyway, cutting the corner, as it were, of the racetrack. Which doesn't mean he can't hear the announcer's booming voice echoing over this shut-off section of the city.

"WOULD YOU LOOK AT THOSE FOUR GO! THEY'RE REALLY TAKING THIS RACE SERIOUSLY, AND IT LOOKS LIKE THE FANS ARE EATING IT UP! #RACEFOREQUALITY IS TRENDING ALL ACROSS JAPAN! GET YOUR DONATIONS IN NOW, AND THE HERO BILLBOARD ASSOCIATION SAYS THEY'LL MATCH YOU 10X OVER!"

Tensei huffs, kicking off a wall to dodge a dumpster, thinking that at least one good thing has come from this impromptu bit of hero-ing. Then, he promptly stumbles as the first part of the announcement registers.

'Four'?? What do they mean by 'four'???

Blinking rapidly, Tensei risks a glance up, but he can't see Koichi in the narrow strip of sky between the buildings. He'll just have to hope his friend saw the plan and no new villains have joined the fray.

In the meantime, he can see the intersection coming up ahead that should dump him right in front of the thief, assuming the purse-snatcher stayed on course. If Tensei's guess is right, it will have been irresistible for someone with a speed quirk to ignore such a conveniently cleared raceway.

Hurdling over a parked car and sliding down the hood, Tensei's quirk-modified sneakers smack into the pavement with a hard thump as he reaches the mouth of the alley and skids to a stop just before reaching the street. He's not breathing hard, yet, but his engines smoke with the strain of so much speed.

Cautiously he peers around the corner, anticipating that the thief will be passing by any second now, Koichi hot on his heels.

What he sees, though, has his eyes widening to almost comical levels. Over the loudspeakers, the announcer is just as incredulous.

"WOULD YOU LOOK AT THAT! THIS RACE HAS TURNED INTO A CAVALRY BATTLE!"



In Koichi's defense, he's not had much practice with *landing*. So... his aim is a bit off.

"Geroff me!!" The thief yells, staggering sideways as Koichi clings tightly to his head and shoulders, fingers in a death grip on the man's face.

"Give me back the purse you stole!" Koichi manages to choke out, trying to ignore his stomach as the criminal lurches from side to side, attempting to throw him off. Incredibly, he's still sprinting at an insane speed down the raceway.

"Oh, that's done already," a bright voice laughs. Koichi glances over to see angel-man flapping alongside them, holding up the little blue bag with a satisfied smile.

"Figured this was what you were after," the winged man continues, slinging the bag over his shoulder. Under Koichi's forearms, he feels the thief cursing and struggling to throw him off, while up ahead, he can see the clever trap that Iida had prepared getting closer and closer.

Koichi and the winged guy exchange a look and nod before Koichi lets go of the criminal, who rockets ahead, yelling curses at them as he flees. That's okay, though. They have the purse; now, they just need the *net*.

Up ahead, the fifty-foot long blow-up tunnel stands proud and tall, ready to welcome those who finish the race. The compulsion to run through it would be hard for anyone to resist. So, it would be a shame if the far end of it... collapsed.

"We get this end?" Koichi calls to his erstwhile flying partner just as the thief enters the tunnel. The winged man grins and suddenly lets loose a flurry of feathers. For a hot second, Koichi thinks the man is molting.

*'THE SUPPORT YOU DIDN'T GET', GOES UNSAID, BUT
KOICHI HEARS IT ANYWAY.*

But no — the feathers are zipping toward the opening of the inflatable tunnel and *puncturing* the big blow-up mouth, dragging the deflating plastic to the ground and practically bolting it there. Koichi is pretty sure his mouth drops open. He barely even registers Iida doing something high-octane and crazy at the other end of the tunnel, effectively trapping the speedy thief inside.

"Aha," the vigilante says as the winged man lands next to him, raking a sheepish hand down the back of his neck when he sees that his helper is *definitely* a teenager. "Thanks for the assist! I'm Ko- The Crawler."

Inside the middle of the tunnel, loud cursing can be heard along with thumping against the tough plastic. Along the sidelines, reporters, fans, and event managers are yelling questions at them, but none have approached, unsure of the full situation. Taking advantage of the temporary reprieve, the

winged guy offers a hand.

"Call me Hawks. That was a neat trap you and Ingenium set up. Are you one of his sidekicks?"

"Nah — just a friend," Koichi says lightly, shaking Hawks' hand. Then, he looks toward the far end of the tunnel to see lida jogging their way. He waves, hoping that Hawks won't pry into what agency he's from.

"lida!" he yells. "What the heck?!?"

"It worked, didn't it??" lida calls back, laughing. "Got sidekicks on the way to come take this guy in, but he's not going anywhere anytime soon. Who's this?"

"Hawks," Koichi introduces. "He got the purse back and helped close this end of the tunnel." He turns to the winged guy. "Are you a hero?"

"In training," Hawks confirms, reaching out to shake lida's offered hand before gesturing at the signage and the crowds. "What's all this about anyway?"

Before lida can answer, the announcer pipes up over the speakers.

"WHAT A RACE! LOOKS LIKE ONE OF THE SPEEDSTERS HAS BEEN CAUGHT IN THE TUNNEL AND AN IDATEN TRUCK IS ON THE WAY TO HELP HIM OUT! MEANWHILE, DONATIONS FOR THE RACE FOR QUIRK EQUALITY HAVE JUST TOPPED OVER HALF A MILLION DOLLARS! THAT'S A NEW RECORD, FOLKS!"

"Guess that answers that question," Hawks muses, wings flapping lightly behind him. "I suppose that was all caught on TV?"

Koichi tugs at his mask, securing it in place over his nose. lida laughs.

"Probably why the donation was so large." He tilts his head. "Though, I guess we weren't being really 'equal' just now, racing out ahead of everyone."

lida turns to Koichi. "This is actually what I was texting you about earlier! We're raising money to help get kids in school the quirk support they need."

'The support you didn't get', goes unsaid, but Koichi hears it anyway. A warm feeling spreads throughout his chest.

"Sounds like maybe we should do this race properly, then," Hawks says in an almost quiet voice. Koichi glances at him and sees a thoughtful look on the teen's face. Iida grins in response.

"Definitely! And look, that's the sidekicks showing up!"

With the thief taken into custody, the purse on its way back to its owner, and the collapsed tunnel removed from the racetrack, the heroes and vigilante line up at the finish line, preparing to get back to the racers still making their way through the course.

Hawks adjusts his visor and flexes his wings lightly behind him, and Iida rolls his ankles to loosen them, gulping down the last of his orange juice before tossing his bottle back to a sidekick. Koichi just accepts an antacid with a happy wave to the medic station before coming back to join the other two.

"Now, I know I just met you guys," Hawks says amiably. "So, I just want you to know there's no hard feelings when I leave ya behind."

"Oho??" Iida laughs. "I was about to ask if it was hard to get dust out of your feathers, since that's where you're gonna be left."

"Guys," Koichi says, activating his quirk on the soles of his feet and on one palm. "Are we really racing back to the race?"

"Oh, most definitely."

"Yup."

Shaking his head, Koichi braces as Iida begins a countdown for them.

"3.."

"2.."

"1.."

"GO!"

And they're off to the races.





GAM









NICE GUYS FINISH LAST

written by *eraspurrecloud*
art collab by *indipindyl6*

All men are not created equal.

Some are born with incredibly heroic quirks and are given the opportunity to train their powers to become pros and save people, while a rare few in this world are born with no powers at all. And the average person? Well, they're born with the average quirk; never capable of being destined for greatness or ridicule. Just mediocrity.

But that hasn't stopped average, nice-guy, Koichi Haimawari. Born with an average quirk, he's committed himself to making his power something more than just average. His quirk, 'Slide and Glide', allows him to slide over flat surfaces by emitting a repelling force from his hands and feet. He's worked hard to train his quirk to better serve others in his venture as a vigilante. Even without the proper authorization to use his quirk, he's determined to use it for good, despite the possible consequences.

That is, as 'good' as he's capable of. Even if it means just helping people with directions or throwing away trash, he wants to be of use to others. And his quirk is useful in allowing him to quickly get around the city to find those who need help.

Though, he still hasn't gotten great at stopping himself when he gets up to higher speeds. Before he knows it, he finds himself sliding down the sidewalk, tumbling right into the back of a bald, tattooed, musclehead.

And he looks *pissed*.

"Oh!" Koichi yelps the moment he realizes he collided with, not a building, but, in fact, the colossal man that is now towering over him with a menacing scowl on his face. A cold chill runs down Koichi's spine and he immediately

presses his nose to the ground, bowing as low as he possibly can in an effort to apologize. "S-sorry about that! I should really be more careful," he shrieks out in an almost indecipherable pitch.

"You made me drop my Manju..." the terrifying man says with a calm, but equally as terrifying and intimidating voice. He lifts Koichi into the air by the collar of his iconic Golden-Age All Might Hoodie. "What's this? You playing hero? Well, I got news for you kid, I hate heroes."

"You hate heroes?" Koichi parrots with an incredulous chuckle. "N-nobody hates heroes."

"I do. And this jacket of yours is seriously pissing me off." The menacing man clenches his other fist, readying himself to retaliate.

"Now hold on! I'm sure we can come to an understanding if we just talk about this rationally..."

"Hey, isn't that Nice Guy?" a bystander whispers to their friend as they point at the commotion.

"What? No, it's not—" Koichi responds, in an effort to correct them of his real name.

"Nice Guy, huh?" The bald mountain of a man smirks. "Haven't you heard nice guys finish last?"

"Uh, it's actually The Crawl—Hrhrrrr!"

A solid punch to the gut is all it takes to knock Koichi out before he can even finish speaking.

That's how things usually go for Koichi as a vigilante. In the grand scheme of things, most people would say his work never really made a difference. He didn't have a flashy quirk he could use against villains like all the pros could. He wasn't even much good in a fight either. No one ever talked about the small injustices he worked so hard to correct.

Nevertheless, he refused to give up.

He had committed to using his power for good, regardless of what the law says. Because that's what heroes do. They risk everything they can to help others, no matter the cost.

So, every day he'd go to school, go to work, and, all the while, he'd do

whatever he could to help people in need before going home for the day.

He slithers his way up the side of the building all the way to the rooftop, and peers over the edge. His body goes rigid the moment he locks eyes with another person waiting up there— none other than the underground hero Eraserhead. He's used to coming home and finding Pop Step or Knuckleduster inviting themselves to his place, but he never expected to see the Erasure hero standing practically at his front door. Koichi responds to the awkward encounter by wordlessly sliding back down the building.

But he isn't quite as deft as the capture weapon that effortlessly binds itself around Koichi's arm, pulling him back up to the rooftop. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Ah, Eraserhead! Who, me? I was uh, well, it just so happens that I, uh..." Koichi stumbles on his words, nervous to be in the presence of the grouchiest pro in existence. He quiets his rambling, defeated. "I actually live here," he admits. "UH, but it's hard to get up here if I don't use my quirk, and I haven't used my power on anyone, I swear! And technically, the law is 'no use of quirks on public roads!'" At this point, he'll say just about anything to keep from getting on Eraserhead's bad side.

"Relax, Crawler. You're not in trouble," Eraserhead tells him, to get him to stop talking.

"I'm not?"

"You're what I'd call a low-priority case. You haven't exactly given me much cause to incriminate you. All I've seen you do is climb a building, after all." "Oh, well, that's a relief," Koichi sighs, literally wiping nervous sweat from his brow.

"You really live in this dump?" Eraserhead asks, turning his gaze away from the street below him to get a better look at the shack behind him.

"Thanks for wording it so tactfully," Koichi spits out the sarcasm with a pout. "But, yeah, I do. My job doesn't pay much, but as long as I've got a roof over my head, this is good enough for me."

"Hmph," Eraserhead quietly responds in a thoughtful breath. He'd never say it out loud, but he, very unfortunately, can relate to that, so he doesn't press further.

"What are you doing up here, by the way? Shouldn't you be patrolling down there? You know, to intimidate criminals with that deathly stare of yours?"



"Real criminals will commit crimes no matter what the circumstance. But if they don't see heroes in the streets, then their guard will be down. Patrolling from up here means I can keep an eye on things and catch them by surprise."

"Hm. I guess that makes sense."

The air between two of them grows quiet for a few moments, though only Eraserhead finds himself bothered by it. "You're not still playing at being a hero out there are you?"

"I'm not playing," Koichi says with complete sincerity. "I use my quirk to help people, because that's what heroes do."

"You're not authorized to help people in that way. You don't have the skills or the training to do so." Eraserhead stops himself, realizing he's coming across a little more hurtful than he intends, so he shifts his tone to a more sincere one. "I'll admit, your actions are admirable, but you're playing 'hero-make-believe', and that's dangerous." He's not sure why, but he feels compelled to try and steer this boy down the right path. He just doesn't know what the right thing to say is. "If you want to be a hero so badly, why wouldn't you go

about it the right way? Go through the proper channels like the pros have?"

"Well, if we're being honest, I actually applied to a hero school in Tokyo but I... didn't make it to the entrance exam on time," he admits.

"You were late to something that important?" Eraserhead can hardly believe that to be true. For someone who wants to help people as much as he says he does, what would be the reason to miss such an important exam? "Maybe it's for the best then."

"Yeah..." Koichi can only agree, knowing the reason he was late was because he was saving a child from drowning. He had sacrificed the safety of his future for the safety of another person's life; the true act of a hero. But telling people that sort of thing feels like bragging, so he simply agrees with what he's just heard. "But that's okay," he says with a smile.

"Hm?"

"Because... it's a hero's job to risk everything for other people. They'd do anything to save someone. Sometimes that includes breaking the law."

"Those laws are in place to protect everyone. Otherwise there'd be chaos," Eraserhead recites by rote. It's so habitual at this point, he almost wonders how much of what he's saying he actually believes to be true.

"You're probably right, but... license or no, I can't abandon people in need."

"And that's why The Crawler was born, huh?"

"Koichi by day, The Crawler by night." Koichi smirks, doing his best All Might pose. "Oh, that's right! I don't think I've ever told you my real name before."

"That information doesn't interest me," Eraserhead tells him coolly.

"Huh?! How come?" Koichi literally can't understand the mentality of not wanting to know someone's name, considering it's such a basic construct of life and relationships.

"Heroes shouldn't be wasting time on formalities," he explains.

"But isn't public image part of being a hero? Y'know, knowing how to work a crowd and getting people to trust you?"

"They'll trust you if you're there to help them. That's your only job. Public schmoozing is All Might's shtick. And I'm not All Might," he says, curtly.

rolling off his tongue with ease.

Koichi slinks his head into his shoulders, pouting his lips. "Gee, I guess you're right that you don't need to be likeable to be a hero," he childishly mutters under his breath.

"I'm not exactly interested in being liked."

"I don't get it."

"What's that?" Eraserhead asks, though disinterested.

"Why did you become a hero?" Koichi pauses for a moment, noting the very faint reaction from Eraserhead that is almost indiscernible. Is it annoyance? Or did Koichi's words actually cut deep? "Not to be insulting or anything, but heroes are meant to be cheery and approachable, and you're not exactly the friendliest person I know..." He almost regrets saying those last words, for fear of how Eraserhead would take it, but he presses on. "So, why *are* you a

ONLY SOMEONE LIKE ALL MIGHT COULD DO THAT.

hero?"

Eraserhead had never really been asked a question like that before, so it takes him a few moments to really think about what the answer would be. He knows why he's a hero *now*. He's pushing on in someone else's memory. But, what spurred him to heroism in the first place?

Instead of Eraserhead's response, Koichi's question is met with a resounding *BOOM* and a civilian's scream coming from down below.

"What's going on?" Koichi asks, as he leans over the edge to get a better view, not far behind Eraserhead. It's from there that he can see a gargantuan villain rampaging through the streets. "Woah, that guy's huge!"

Koichi looks on at the colossal villain— a strange humanoid creature with grey-ish blue skin and... is that part of its brain exposed? Its eyes are seemingly devoid of life or any intelligent thought entirely. He watches as the

villain tramples the ground on all fours, with its shoulders hunched upwards. A true monster.

But its appearance seems to be just that. Koichi notices the villain's quirk allows it to shoot some kind of laser out of the palms of its hands. The laser is powerful enough to knock down the walls of a building, so there's no telling what it might do if a civilian got caught in the crossfire. Given its unbelievable size, the range of the laser itself is tremendous as well.

"Stay put!" Eraserhead demands as he lowers his goggles and sends his binding cloth to a lamppost down below.

"I can help!" Koichi pleads with the hero.

"No!" Eraserhead yells back. "Just get to safety!" He takes off like a shot, leaving Koichi on the rooftop by himself. He can see that Eraserhead has activated his quirk to stop the villain, but it just continues on, trampling through the city.

Koichi's gut churns as he watches the destruction below him. He hears the screams of innocents down below and realizes there's no way Eraserhead can handle all that on his own. How could anyone take down a villain that size *and* keep people from getting hurt? Only someone like All Might could do that.

... Someone like All Might...

'C'mon Koichi! Move your feet, damn it!'

With a trembling hand, he reaches down into the deepest recesses of his backpack before pulling out his signature All Might hoodie, donning it with a fierce passion, and then dramatically leaping over the roof's edge to slide his way down the side of the building.

"I'm here to help!" Koichi yells to the crowd of people, including Eraserhead.

"Crawler! What are you doing here?! I told you to get to safety!"
"A hero can't stand by and watch people in trouble!" Koichi yells back, pushing the fear inside of him as far down as he can.

'What do I do?' he thinks to himself. 'Eraser's stopped him from using his quirk, but that guy's still seriously dangerous. I have to think of something.' He looks around, watching as people are running all over, trying to find a safe place to be. *'I should at least get the civilians somewhere safe, right? So Eraser can focus on taking down the villain...'*

Too focused on trying to come up with a plan, Koichi doesn't notice the villain starting to charge at him until it's almost too late. He yells out in fear, but finds himself being pulled out of the villain's path somehow. He ends up rolling at Eraserhead's feet, having realized it was he who used his binding cloth to help him dodge the attack.

"You're in the way, Crawler! Get out of here! Now!"

"No way! I'm not leaving you to fight this thing on your own! You need help!"

"Other heroes will be here any minute! You're gonna get yourself killed!"

He may be right. If Eraserhead can't take that villain down on his own, how could someone like Koichi—a kid with an average quirk—do anything to help?

An average quirk...

"I have an idea!" Koichi yells, darting off toward the villain, with his Slide and Glide.

"Crawler!" Eraserhead yells out to him, trying not to take his eyes off the rampaging villain.

"Just keep him distracted! When I give you the signal, give him his quirk back!"

"Damn kid...!" Eraserhead does his best to keep himself from blinking so that this disastrous villain doesn't get its quirk back, but now he has to worry about Koichi getting hurt too. *What is that kid thinking?*

'I know I can do this!' Koichi steels his resolve. He keeps on gliding, heading right toward the terrifying brain villain. Every inch closer he gets, the more afraid he becomes and yet... more determined. *'A real hero never backs down. A real hero saves people in trouble. And heroes always win... because nice guys don't finish last!'*

Koichi whips right past the villain, spinning 180 degrees to face the villain from behind.

"ERASER! NOW!"

It's irrational to do so, but Eraserhead listens to Koichi, deactivating his quirk and allowing the villain access to his powers again. The instant it gets

its quirk back, it lifts one of its arms, readying a laser. Luckily, Eraserhead is quick to jump out of the beam's trajectory. That's when he spots Koichi behind the villain. Koichi locks his feet into place with his quirk and aims his hand at one of the villain's legs.

"ULTIMATE MOVE! SHOOTY-GO-BLAM!"

With his SGB, Koichi begins firing a barrage of blasts at the villain's leg. With one arm up in the air, and now one leg having been battered, the villain is swept underfoot and sprawled out on the ground.

Eraserhead takes this opportunity to tie up the villain's arms and legs with his binding cloth. Wound up tight, the villain is no longer able to move.

"It worked..." Koichi whispers to himself in awe. He looks down at his own hand, realizing he made that happen. He and his average quirk helped to take down a tremendous villain.

"You almost got yourself killed, Crawler," Eraserhead finally scolds Koichi

'WHEN THERE'S NOTHING TO BE GAINED, RISING TO THE CHALLENGE AT THOSE TIMES IS SURELY THE MARK OF A TRUE HERO'.

once other pros and police arrive on the scene.

"Are you gonna rat me out?" Koichi says, looking to the ground in shame.

"You don't have to phrase it like that," Eraserhead spits out, annoyed at his 'innocent-boy' bit. "No, I'm not." Eraserhead crosses his arms; the perfect stance for chewing someone out. "I'll admit, you really helped me today, but don't think you can keep getting away with being so reckless. Next time you may not be so lucky."

"If it means I can save someone in trouble, then respectfully... I'll take my chances."

Eraserhead chuckles derisively. "You sound just like him..." he says under his breath, though it's unclear who 'him' is.

"Huh?"

"Nevermind. I'm going to give my statement to the police. You should head on home."

"Right... Got it."

Eraserhead and Koichi both turn from one another, but after a few steps, Eraserhead pauses. "It's Aizawa, by the way." Koichi turns back in response. "Just don't go spreading that around to people, yeah?"

"... Yeah," Koichi says with a smile as he watches Eraserhead walk away.

Koichi may just be an average kid with an average quirk, but his heroic spirit is what ended up saving lives. Despite the fact that he won't be getting the public's admiration for putting a stop to that villain-- that the role would instead go to Eraserhead (much to his dismay)—license or no, Koichi couldn't imagine doing anything differently. It's like All Might says, 'when there's nothing to be gained, rising to the challenge at those times is surely the mark of a true hero'.

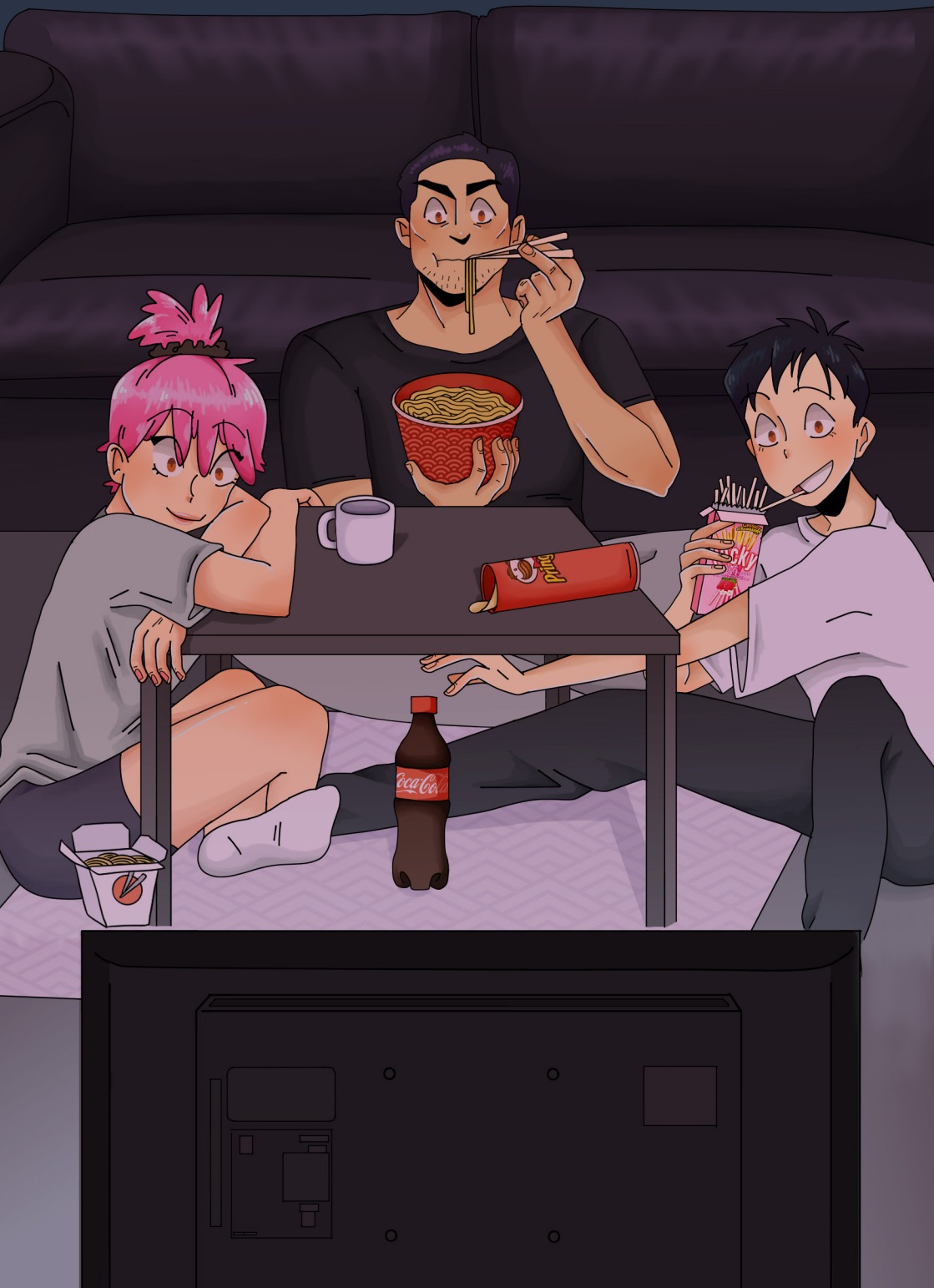




さんやう
ラーメン
やきとり

MEWY101













TURN OUR SHAPES INTO SHADOWS

written by Leafy
art collab by lyrroth

Frankly, this had been one of the worst nights in a while for impromptu crime-stopping. Not that Koichi was *asking* for worse nights — really, all he wanted to ask for right now was a nice, long night's sleep and maybe a few painkillers at his bedside in the morning.

He ducked under another swing from the gigantic villain — more Trigger, apparently. It was kind of sad to see the drug rise up through the cracks again — and really, *really* regretted the choice of taking a solo-patrol tonight. Because Kazuho was tired from exams in school, and Iwao was recovering from a cracked rib that looked more broken, so Koichi decided it would be totally fine to take a patrol on his own. It wasn't like a gigantic, Trigger-boosted villain was going to crawl out from an alleyway and try to rip him to shreds.

When the blades from the villain's massive *fingers* extended again, Koichi barely managed to dodge. The gash in his forearm was a damn good reminder to *not* let himself get tagged again. It sucked, it *hurt*, and he definitely wasn't going to make it back to his place in time to join game night. If he were less tired, Koichi would be mad about it. His arm throbbed in pain, like a wildfire through his skin.

He was pretty sure he wouldn't be able to tackle this one alone. The last time Koichi got in close to try and trip the guy over, he just got his arm skewered. And made the giant guy angrier. So now he had even *less* of a chance to finish him off because he couldn't get in close. Koichi sighed wearily, the road flying beneath his feet, and regretted making the decision to tackle a villain alone in the middle of winter. It was *cold*. It was cold and the frost gathering on the asphalt only made it more difficult to slide along the roads without slipping and rocketing off into a wall.

At the sound of rumbling footsteps, he flung his head up and cursed as the villain charged him. Frantic, Koichi looked up and there was a glint of silver before the rush of air that threw him off his feet. Something wrapped around his stomach and ripped him back through the air, a safe distance away from the villain's needle-fingers that were embedded in the asphalt. Koichi blinked.

'That could have been me,' he thought and not without horror closing his throat. Helping people out was all well and good, but getting skewered would *really* suck. At the clearing of a throat, Koichi snapped his head around to locate the speaker — and was met by a hunched blur of black on the wall above him, goggle-covered eyes flashing an ominous and familiar shade of yellow. Behind him, the villain went down in a crash and a roar.

"You trying to get turned into roadkill?" a tired voice called. Koichi yelped and slid under another giant fist, slamming uncomfortably — painfully — hard into a wall before his gaze landed on the gray-black blur perching on the rooftop. Familiar eyes flashed yellow, and the giant villain staggered.

"Eraserhead-san!" he crowed, and the Pro-Hero almost looked ready to leave already. If it weren't for the giant villain rampaging around the streets, Koichi had no doubts that he'd rather be fast asleep. His goggles weren't up yet, and the eye-bags he was sporting were *seriously* impressive. Like he'd decided to just go a week without sleeping, and hated every second of being awake.

Well... that probably wasn't *too* inaccurate. But his glare was much more impressive than before, dark and murderous and exhausted all at once. The pop-up villain eyed them warily — or more accurately, eyed *Eraserhead* warily, clenching their fists experimentally. Koichi tensed.

"You want me to be a distraction?" The next part, *I make a good punching bag*, didn't leave his lips because the glare levelled at him only grew heavier and Koichi really didn't want to annoy a pro hero. "I can do that." His quirk was geared towards evasion and being a general nuisance to villains strong enough to knock down buildings.

"On three?" Aizawa gave a sharp nod, and Koichi ducked down, his quirk thrumming to life at his fingertips like a warm greeting. The road flew beneath him and the blade-villain glared before lunging — right into a kick from Aizawa. The villain staggered, and under Erasure, he hit the floor. Koichi whooped and slammed the brakes on his quirk, sliding to a halt just a few metres away. Distantly, Eraserhead grunted as he hit the floor.

After such a long, drawn out night of getting turned into a human pincushion, Koichi was proud enough that he'd managed to work in a team with a real pro hero to take down a genuine villain. He whirled toward Aizawa with a grin on his face hidden beneath the mask over his mouth. The hero looked at him and sighed, weary-looking before urgency turned his back rigid and black eyes widened in alarm, flashing yellow.

"Crawler, look out—"

Even with Eraserhead's warning, he couldn't fully dodge.

The sharp metal blade shot out from the villain's fingertips and, despite Koichi lurching backwards to avoid it, it still ran through the flesh of his calf as easily as a hot knife slides through butter. Koichi staggered — biting down on the yelp on his tongue because *that hurt*. There was a curse, rapid footsteps and a heavy-sounding impact as Eraserhead landed a harsh kick to the villain; he focused on dragging himself away from the homicidal maniac and getting to safety. Wide-eyed, Koichi watched as Aizawa dropped down with a grace he knew he could never fully replicate, wiping sweat from his brow with a scowl.

*COLD WINTERS WERE BETTER SPENT WRAPPED UP IN
DOZENS OF LAYERS OF BLANKETS.*

"Thanks for the save, man."

"You need to go home and rest." Aizawa pointed to his leg and then to his arm, squinted gaze weighing the world. "I don't want to see you out here again until you can walk on *that* without falling on your face."

"It's not *that* bad," he murmured petulantly, arms crossed. Aizawa shot him a bemused look before making a shooping motion with his hands. Koichi took a step forward, staggered, and the ground swung up to meet his face. Koichi groaned— with his leg and arm aching something fierce, there was no way he could easily use his quirk to go home. He looked up to the tops of the buildings, to the stars blanketed by thick clouds of gray, and sighed.

"Looks like I'm walking... goodnight, Eraserhead-san." Koichi gave a small wave. The other hero rolled his eyes but raised his hand in a weak response — better than nothing — before stalking off down the streets. With a start, he noticed the not-so distant police sirens wailing, echoing through the labyrinth of the roads, and took off limping the path home.

He'd never been more thankful that the first part of his vigilante career was giving directions and helping people find their ways around. It meant he wasn't about to get lost on top of everything else this terrible night threw at him.

The walk wasn't particularly pleasant — not with his leg threatening to buckle with every other step, and slow trickles of blood making their way down his arm. The cold was biting, the air was sharp, and Koichi *really* regretted that his hoodies weren't thicker. Cold winters were better spent wrapped up in dozens of layers of blankets. Even though his hand was wet with blood where it was pressed against the gash in his arm, he didn't regret the fight at all. Because at the end of the night, the sight of his apartment was blissful, like a safe haven after a storm. Koichi limped just a little bit faster to get to it. He could almost *feel* the warm air, ready to greet him.

He nudged the door open with an uncooperative arm— with a wince as one of his many (*many*) scrapes decided to make itself known again— and, as the light from within momentarily stunned his eyes, he gave a half-hearted wave.

"I'm back..." Koichi murmured quietly, though his voice shattered the calm in the room anyway, with both Kazuho and Iwao pausing in their round of *whichever* card game for a brief second; a dip of the head to acknowledge his return before returning right back to their silent battle of wits.

Kazuho cleared her throat haughtily, slapping down a card with a firm clearing of her throat and a grumble from Iwao. She won the round, then.

"You're super late back. Took you long en— whoa, hey—!"

So when Koichi's leg gave out and he crashed head-first to the ground, vision an unpromising patchwork of black and gray, he figured that was as good a heads up as he could give in his current, bashed-up state. From the mishmash of grumbles and swearing he heard from above his head, it worked.

'Cool.' The stunned silence hung heavy in the air before they both rushed at him, hands outstretched but tentative.



YOU'RE SUPER
LATE!



TOOK YOU LONG
ENOUGH...



WOAH!



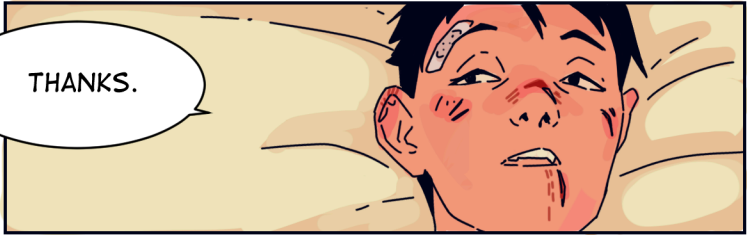
LOOKING LIKE
A ROADKILL.



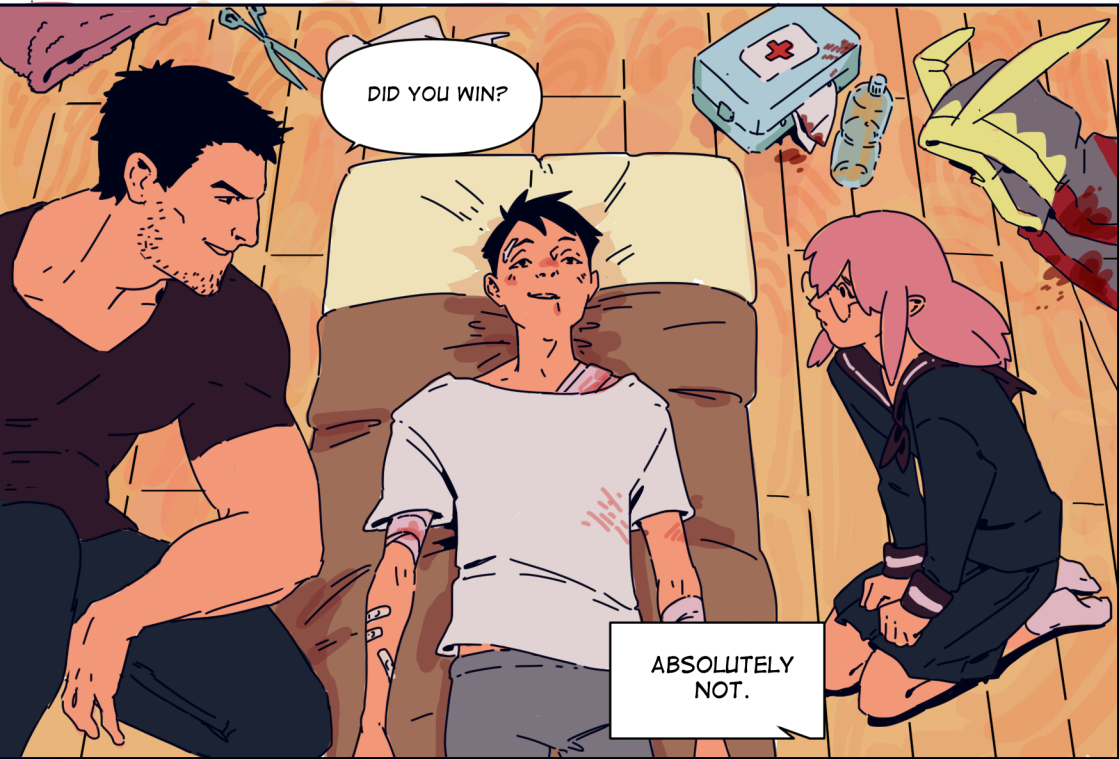
YEAH, NO KIDDING!

HELP ME GET HIM
OFF THE FLOOR.

THANKS.



DID YOU WIN?



ABSOLUTELY
NOT.

Koichi gave a breathy groan and rolled onto his side — because falling onto his bad arm kind of sucked, and by ‘*kind of*’ he meant he wasn’t enjoying the fireworks show behind his eyelids as pain and unconsciousness fought for dominance— and Kazuho reacted first, apparently alarmed enough to bypass the formalities and prod wearily about the worst of his wounds. A few stab wounds here and there weren’t exactly *fun*, but it wouldn’t be *too* bad.

Iwao regarded him wearily. If Koichi were slightly less delirious, he would go out on a limb and label that emotion as concern. Quick to stand and quicker to act, it was him who closed the door behind Koichi and took to looking at him with a critical eye. He’d probably seen worse, but still.

“That doesn’t look good,” Iwao added, “you look like roadkill.” Koichi tried nodding but hit his head on the floor, and promptly flopped once more, prying a surprised sound from Kazuho. She growled loudly, and with a prod to his uninjured shoulder, stood upright once more.

“Yeah, no kidding, *genius!* Help me get him off the floor.”

“Up you go,” Iwao said in that kind of deranged, kind of affectionate voice of his as he hauled Koichi up bodily, unceremoniously dragging him over to the futon he couldn’t remember being laid out when he left. *Huh*. The grip Iwao had on him was secure, but he hadn’t so much as brushed against any of the many cuts and bruises decorating him.

“Thanks,” he breathed. Iwao rolled his eyes. The padding of soft footsteps rang out as Kazuho dumped down the half-full first aid kit that was tucked away under a cabinet in the kitchen. Her critical eyes looked over him once, and she grimaced.

“You look awful...” Kazuho murmured. Her eyes were wide, frightened, and really, Koichi thought he forgot too often that she *was* only a kid, and that all the blood and gross across his hoodie must have been scary to her. Iwao, however, held no such trepidation in the face of Koichi’s beaten-up state. He was thoughtful for a moment, then he grinned.

“Did you win?” *Absolutely not*. Koichi gave a weak cough as a non-answer and Kazuho mercifully tapped Iwao on the shoulder. Annoyance was written clear as day on her face — *that* was familiar. Koichi felt better just seeing it. Familiar was good, familiar was predictable, and after such a wild night it was a real boon to have something to cling to.

“*Stop*,” Kazuho grumbled, punching Iwao on the arm with a scowl. “Do you— how do you feel? What *happened*? Do you need anything?”

"Ah... another Trigger villain, I think." He frowned. "I didn't get a chance to check the tongue after Eraserhead-san knocked him out. He told me to go home, so I did."

"Make sure you take a painkiller for that headache." Iwao drummed a finger against his temple knowingly.

Koichi blinked. He never *broadcasted* having a headache. To be honest, he almost forgot about it himself. He had a few bigger things to worry about, like his sliced up arm and leg. They demanded more attention than the ache in his head that he got from sliding back and forth and flipping around to avoid getting skewered by a maniacal knife-fingered villain.

"Yeah. Will do."

"You feeling any better yet?"

"Kinda...? Less shaky. Thanks." He closed his eyes, finally allowing the dizziness of the night to pass over him in a tidal wave of black. At least he could feel his fingers now. The sounds of the organised chaos around him stretched out and fell away, leaving him wrapped in a comfy echo of their presences.

*THERE'S SOMETHING AKIN TO PRIDE THERE THOUGH,
MASKED BEHIND CALM BEMUSEMENT.*

When he opened his eyes, he wasn't entirely sure how long had passed. Small, kind hands were fluttering about the gash in his arm, now wrapped up, and steadier hands had ice pressed to a bruise on Koichi's hip from being thrown right at the beginning of the fight, if he remembered correctly. Iwao looked at him for a second before he huffed. "Good to see you again."

"I... didn't go anywhere...? Ow..." he murmured. Kazuho just poked at his uninjured shoulder before resuming her surprisingly gentle ministrations, the movements almost enough to lull him to sleep. Before his eyes could slip shut, he caught a glimpse of Iwao nudging something just out of sight. "My hoodie is wrecked... and I really liked that one, too."

Limited edition *and* with golden bands in place of the yellow accents.

"Uh, *you're* a little more torn up than that hoodie, dummy," Kazuho murmured. Her hands were gentle as they went over his wounds with iodine and soft wipes, worry in her eyes. She was trying, she *really* was, but no matter how careful she was in cleaning his wounds out it still hurt. He still flinched, and panic flashed onto her face for a moment. "Sorry."

In contrast, Iwao was firmer, but not harsh, *never* harsh. His hands were sturdier and stronger but he wrapped Koichi's wounds efficiently, with practised ease that spoke of years of experience. His eyes held an emotion Koichi couldn't put a name to, but it was warm. Safe.

There's something akin to pride there though, masked behind calm bemusement.

"Honestly, *how* do you get yourself so beat up?"

"You gotta stop hesitating, kid. Sometimes you just gotta crack some skulls, easy as." As Iwao talked, Kazuho continued working — not without a heavy frown on her face, Koichi noted tiredly — with diligence in her movements, bright in her eyes. She was stern but caring, and Iwao was jovial but quieter in his concern, and Koichi couldn't think of any place he'd rather be right now than here with them.

"I don't think that hoodie can be salvaged, anyway," Kazuho sighed. She... she looked pretty tired. A pinch frightened. Koichi felt bad for putting that expression there, for crashing an otherwise calm night. "Bloodstains are tough. You got it all over this futon, too, it's gonna be difficult to get out."

Iwao shook his head resolutely. "Nah, don't worry about it. Blood comes out real easy if you know what you're doing." As if *that* wasn't a bizarre enough thing to say. Koichi huffed weakly, and Kazuho looked perturbed for a single second before she rounded back on him with a glare that promised '*pain*' written clearly across her face.

"You know what? I'm not even going to ask. Koichi, dummy, how do you feel now?"

He thought to the aches and scrapes across his body, and bit his lip. *Bad* was the simplest answer to her question, but he'd already stressed her and Iwao out enough by now, so he dipped his head and yawned widely.

"Tired."

She rolled her eyes, but the concern that was in her shaking hands earlier had shifted into the set of her frown, heavy and solemn. "Go to sleep. We'll hold down the fort here, *Crawler*." She gave a playful prod to his knee.

The laugh that escaped him was a mite exhausted. It surprised him, though, and he groaned as he involuntarily shifted his bad leg.

"Isn't it unethical to harass an injured person?" At the grumbled complaint, Iwao snorted. Koichi just groaned and rolled onto his side, facing towards the table they'd been sat at earlier. The cards atop it were abandoned. "Even if it isn't, it's rude."

"Well, if this '*injured person*' didn't almost get themselves turned into roadkill, maybe I wouldn't have to be rude to 'em."

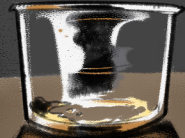
Despite her harsh words, Kazuho's hand settled on his forearm, below the wound, and squeezed lightly. Across the room, Iwao was messing with the TV— he saw static before the voices came through, a few news reporters and other familiar shows. Iwao didn't look particularly pleased with any of them, because he turned away from it with an irritated look on his face. Koichi yawned.

"Just relax. We'll be here."



DETECTIVE POP☆STEP IN
"the case of the
STOLEN PUDDING"

This was a crime;
an unforgivable
crime.



My pudding...
The pudding that
I was saving...

was taken away
from me.

STOLEN.

I was robbed.

It pains me
to think of
what could have
been...



What kind of villain—
No.

DEMON, would commit
such an act?

What drives people
to such thievery?

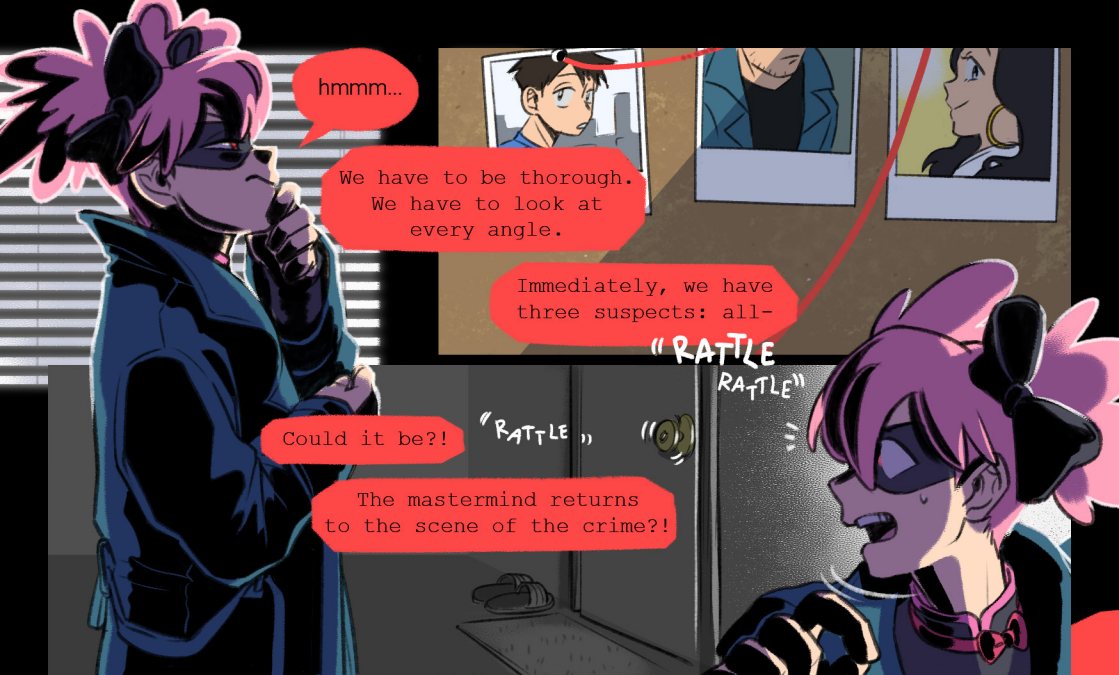
hehehehe



But I've shed
enough tears.

This detective is on
the case, and I've promised
myself I wouldn't rest
until I have found
the culprit.





hmmm...

We have to be thorough.
We have to look at
every angle.

Immediately, we have
three suspects: all-

"RATTLE
RA-TLE"

Could it be?!

"RATTLE"

"OO"

The mastermind returns
to the scene of the crime?!

Pop, you in here?

Wait-!



Why are you hanging
out in the dark?

Looks like the trail
has gone cold, detective.

That was for me...

But this still counts
as a sweet victory!

You know what? You can
have this one.



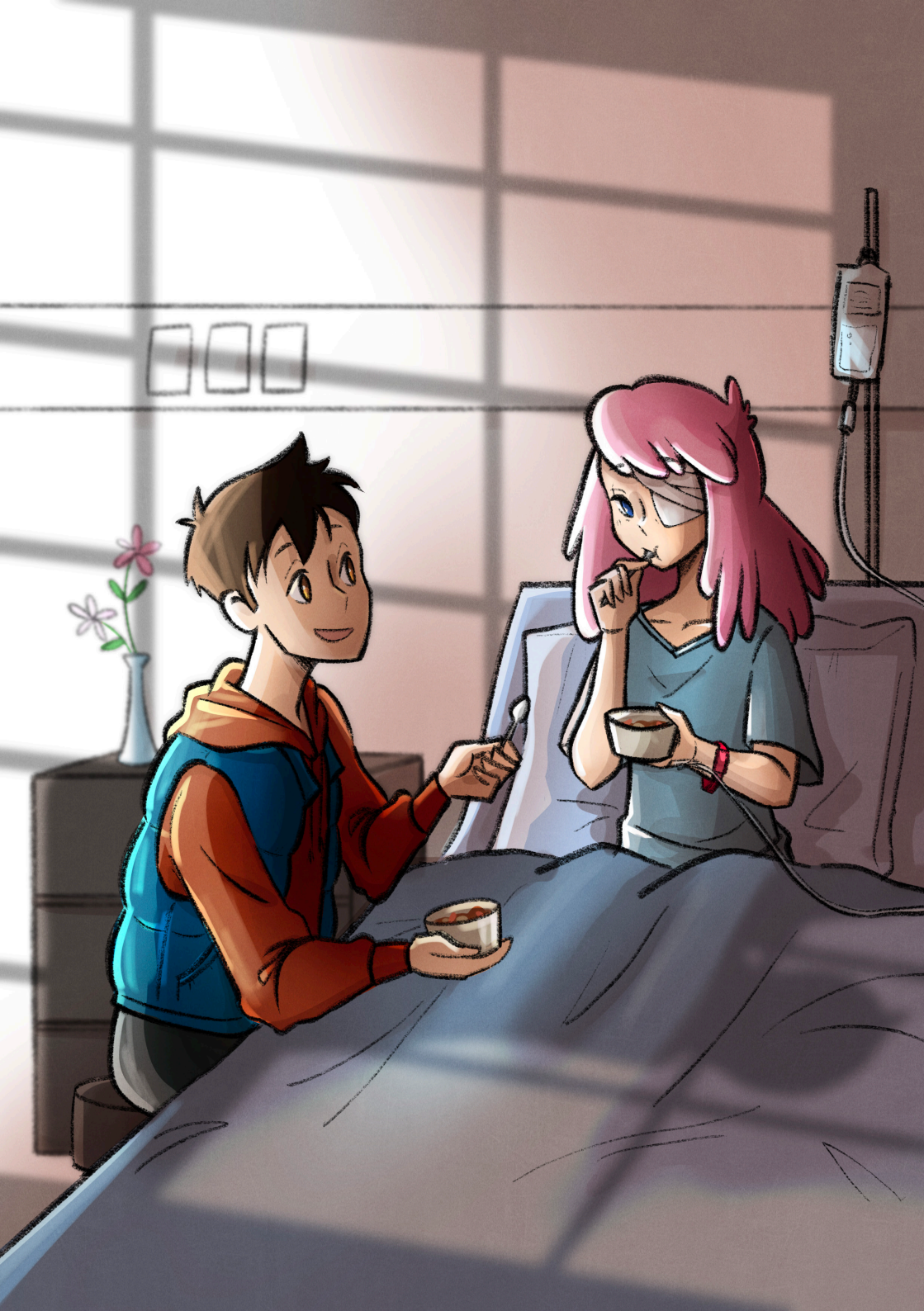
SWIPE!

EEP!!



**CASE
CLOSED**







A FAMILY CAN BE TWO IDIOTS AND AN IDIOT GEEZER

written by *ohmoka*
art collab by *clothed-daffodil*

Koichi hit the ground hard, his head rocking back and slamming into the pavement as his body skidded into a light post. Black spots dotted his vision, and his head swam, the world around him blurring into a disorienting explosion of hazy colors and wispy shapes that flickered like ghosts.

He tried to pull himself up, tried to call for help. His tongue lay in his mouth like lead, unmoving and heavy. The muffled utterances that escaped him fell on deaf ears as a dizzying abyss swallowed the last of his consciousness.

He didn't get up.



"Koichi?"

"Kid?"

"Is he okay?"

Sharp pain roused Koichi, his cheek stinging as if slapped.

Above him, the faint outlines of Pop and Knuckleduster wavered, streaking across his vision.
Koichi blinked.

When his vision didn't clear any, he groaned and resigned himself to the realization that he'd hit his head a lot harder than he'd originally thought.

Sure, he'd cracked his head before, but never this bad. No, this was different

and much more concerning. He probably needed to get his head checked out, assuming Pop and Knuckleduster scraped his sorry bones off the pavement.

"He really doesn't look good," Pop noted, leaning down and poking Koichi's cheek.

An impossible number of Pop's Steps trailed behind her, blurring like smoke. The effect was baffling. It was as if she were blurred and liquified, his eyes capturing her actions like long exposure photography.

"What are we supposed to do with him?" She turned, streams of pink and black trailing after her head.

"We can start by getting him off the street," Knuckleduster replied, hoisting Koichi off the ground and hefting him over his shoulder. "C'mon."

The world rolled, and a wave of nausea welled in Koichi's gut. He scrambled to clutch at the back of Knuckleduster's jacket, desperate to stabilize his motion sickness, but his efforts were in vain. His sluggish hands refused to obey his mind's wishes. When his fingers *did* twitch to life, a heavy numbness crept up his arms and deadened his senses.

The last thing Koichi recalled from before he'd been launched across the pavement was the hulking Instant Villain that he'd been luring through the streets. He'd searched for a safe alley to lead it down, but another villain had intercepted him. Their sneer was all he remembered.

"Jeez, Gramps." Pop's voice floated to Koichi's ears. "Shouldn't you be more careful? He's already all messed up. What if he pukes?"

Knuckleduster only grunted in response and adjusted Koichi with as much care as he would a sack of potatoes. Pop's muttered judgments were as lost as ever on him as they began to head down the nearest alley.

Squeezing his eyes closed, Koichi tried to make peace with his less than comfortable mode of transportation. Once more, he was helpless to his circumstances, thoroughly jostled and barely conscious as he was carried from the scene of his scuffle.

He had no clue how long the trek ahead was, and there was no telling where Knuckleduster intended to tote him off to. So, Koichi resigned himself to mindlessly counting Pop's complaints, accusations, and commentary along with Knuckleduster's occasional bewildering—and mildly concerning—idiosyncrasies.





"It's a quirk," Knuckleduster decided, peering into the depths of Koichi's eyeball, which he'd pried open with his calloused fingers.

"How do you know?" Pop leaned closer, her brow furrowing as she scrutinized Koichi.

"It's not a concussion. I've seen enough of those to know the difference."

"Tch," Pop tutted. She sat back on Koichi's bed and sighed. "Why did I even ask?"

Ignoring her, Knuckleduster lifted one of Koichi's arms and then dropped it, watching as it fell like dead weight.

"Definitely some kind of quirk," he said again, rubbing his chin between his thumb and forefinger. His eyes narrowed, and he prodded Koichi in the ribs.

"Alright. Here's what's gonna happen." Knuckleduster rose from Koichi's bedside, turning to address Pop as if they were alone in the room and not hovering over him.

"You're gonna take day watch for the rest of the afternoon. Just do homework or something and check on him every now and then. I'll do the night watch. If things get out of hand, we'll take him to the professionals. He should be fine, though, so we'll just watch him until it wears off. Got it?"

"Jeez," Pop groaned, flopping back on the bed. "What if I don't wanna watch him?"

"It's part of the job," Knuckleduster said with no room for argument. "I'll be back tonight. If his condition worsens, call someone."

"Call *who*?" Pop whined as Knuckleduster dove out Koichi's window.

Koichi still hadn't fully processed his predicament. At least he'd been brought home and patched up, which was more than he could have hoped for if he'd been alone when he was attacked. Still, he had no clue what was wrong with him other than the obvious: he could barely move or speak, what little movement he had was painfully sluggish and incredibly draining, and everything around him seemed to blur and flow together, except for stationary structures like walls or buildings.

If he had to name the sensation, he'd say he was caught in a state of slow-motion that only affected *him* and the way in which he perceived the world around him. He'd also call it horribly dull and unpleasant.

The blur of pink and black that Koichi had come to know as Pop streaked across his vision, moving away from his bed. Shortly after, she reappeared again, joined by the familiar scent of pudding.

"You don't mind, right?" Pop hummed, already spooning the sweet substance into her mouth without waiting for the reply they both knew he couldn't give.

She perched on the edge of his bed for a moment, staring at him through watchful eyes. Koichi could almost make out Pop's face, the quirk's disorienting effect made less potent by her stillness. Crossing her legs, she pulled her knees into her chest and continued to eat *his* pudding.

*PERHAPS THEY WERE MORE TO HIM THAN THAT;
PERHAPS THEY'D BECOME PRECIOUS TO HIM.*

"So, now what?" she asked, more to herself than to Koichi. "You really can't talk, huh?"

Knuckleduster and Pop had tried to interrogate Koichi when they'd first arrived back at his place, but all he'd managed to get out were garbled groans that were entirely incoherent.

Koichi tried to nod in response and immediately regretted the decision. The quirk punished any attempt at movement, draining his energy down to its dregs.

"Hey, hey! Just sit there, 'kay?" Pop scooched closer to Kochi, sitting beside his propped up body. At least Knuckleduster had been kind enough to rest his back against the wall so that he wasn't entirely prone.

"Well, I guess I'm gonna do homework," Pop mused, tapping her spoon

against the pudding cup's rim.

Finishing her snack, Pop scampered out of sight. She returned with her school bag in hand and made herself comfortable, spreading her notes and books across the floor before sprawling on her stomach amid the organized mess.

Much of the afternoon was spent this way: Pop grinding through her insurmountable workload, and Koichi watching her—or trying to anyway. Her pencils were a kaleidoscope of colors as they danced across her pages, and her legs, kicking in the air behind her, blurred into a muddy shadow that made Koichi feel sick if he watched them for too long.

Unable to move, Koichi's mind wandered. He thought about school and how he'd have to look for work soon, vigilantism and everyone he'd come to know through it, and his mom and what she'd think if she knew what he was really up to in Naruhata. She'd disapprove, of course. Mostly, though, he thought about Knuckleduster and Pop and how, without meaning to, they'd become family to him.

They didn't have to scoop him off the streets, but they had. Nor was it necessary for them to patch him up, but they did.

For so long, he'd only thought of them as his master and his friend. Perhaps they were more to him than that; perhaps they'd become precious to him. And if their actions didn't mistake him, maybe, just maybe, they felt the same.

Before long, Koichi began to doze, his inactivity lulling his body to sleep beneath the heavy blanket of his warm thoughts.



Koichi stirred to the sound of Knuckleduster maneuvering through his window. Why the man didn't just use the front door was beyond him.

"Ah, kid. You're alive," he grunted upon finding Koichi where he'd left him. "That's good."

"Of course he's alive!" Pop squawked before slamming Koichi's fridge shut. "I would have called!"

"Called *who*?" Knuckleduster questioned.

Koichi couldn't believe his ears. Despite his fondness for the pair, he couldn't deny they weren't the sharpest tacks in the box. The irony of this realization was lost on Koichi.

"You said to call someone! If I don't know 'who,' that's your fault!" Pop stomped through Koichi's room and prodded Knuckleduster in the chest.

"Eh, well." The man shrugged. "He's fine, isn't he? No need to fuss."

"No need to fuss? Are you kidding me?" Pop's indignation saturated her spluttering, and her voice rose in volume and pitch. "He could be comatose, ya know?"

"He's not," Knuckleduster replied calmly, unphased by Pop's theatrics. "If he was, he wouldn't waste energy opening his eyes halfway like that." He gestured at Koichi before moving past Pop and removing his jacket.

Much to Koichi's relief, he found that his vision had improved, albeit not by a significant degree. Quick motions blurred together, but he had an easier time identifying them. He also had less trouble moving his limbs, though doing so still consumed considerable energy.

"Get goin'," Knuckleduster advised Pop. "I've got him, and you need to get home."

"Yeah, yeah," she mumbled, throwing her books and supplies into her bag. When she finished, she wandered over to Koichi's side. "I'll come back tomorrow to make sure he hasn't left you for dead, okay? Sorry this sucks so much. It's your fault for being so reckless, though. So I don't feel too bad for you. Just don't die while I'm gone, or I'll be mad."

For a moment, she hovered at his side as if she had more to say, her cheeks rosy and brow pinched. Koichi could almost make out the look of uncertainty wavering on her face.

"I'm not going to leave him for dead. Have more faith in me, kid."

Pop's lips pinched, and she turned abruptly from Koichi, the quickness of her action making his head spin.

"I don't care what you do," she huffed. Her attitude did little to sell her blatant lie, but neither man commented as she marched from the room.

"Alright, kid, let's look at ya," Knuckleduster said, coming to Koichi's side.

As he had the day before, he set about poking and prodding Koichi: peering into his eyes, jabbing him in the ribs, testing his severely limited reflexes, and even prying his mouth open to look at his tongue. Thankfully, he didn't stick his fingers in. Had Koichi the energy to shudder at the thought, he certainly would have.

"You look good—better than before," Knuckleduster stated, clapping a fist into his palm. "Guessin' she didn't feed ya, so I'll get something cooking. Sit tight."

Trepidation coiled in Koichi's gut. He could do little to stop Knuckleduster from rummaging about in his kitchen, and *rummage* he did. The sound of pots, pans, and cupboard doors being carelessly slammed about rang through the apartment.

After the banging and clattering subsided, humming floated from the kitchen, eventually followed by the mouthwatering smell of curry. Koichi's stomach grumbled, reminding him how long it had been since he'd had breakfast that morning. Hours had begun to feel like days; his stomach agreed as much.

"Alright." Knuckleduster returned to Koichi's bedside, sporting an apron Koichi hadn't realized he owned and a steaming bowl of rice topped with curry. "It's time to get something of substance in you. This'll get your energy back and help your body fight against the quirk. Think you can swallow?"

"Mmm," Koichi hummed weakly.

Sitting beside Koichi, Knuckleduster—carefully for once—fed him little bites of curry and rice. He waited patiently for Koichi as he struggled to swallow it down and didn't hassle or hurry him.

Koichi was extremely grateful for Knuckleduster's efforts. He'd landed in quite a frustrating situation and couldn't do much to help himself. Without Knuckleduster, he'd certainly have gone without dinner.

"Rest up," Knuckleduster said, dropping the spoon into Koichi's now-empty bowl. "I've got some calls to make." Leaving Koichi's side, he stepped outside, this time using the front door.

It occurred to Koichi that the man hadn't eaten any of the curry. He'd made it for Koichi simply because he'd known that he needed it. Koichi's eyes prickled at the thought.

Again, affection welled in his chest, spilling into his veins and warming him

from head to toe. Somehow, Pop and Knuckleduster had become his home away from home. He'd miss them when it was time to move on.

Over the next several hours, Knuckleduster checked in on Koichi, not that he'd have realized. He'd long since fallen asleep and was peacefully existing in a dreamscape where he'd never have to part from his friends.

Morning light and the sound of someone lumbering about in the kitchen woke Koichi. His eyes opened with much less effort than he'd needed the day prior, and a promising sigh of relief escaped him.

Being out of commission for the day had been bad enough; he wasn't sure how he'd have fared if the quirk's worst effects lasted longer. Even though vigilantism took up most of his time, he still had college and couldn't afford to forget it.

*HE WISHED THAT HE'D ALWAYS HAVE ROOM IN HIS
HEART FOR THE MEMORIES HE MADE WITH THEM.*

The sound of his front door opening was followed by Knuckleduster rattling off marching orders meant for Pop.

"Rice is in the cooker. Eggs are in the fridge. There's tea. Don't give him coffee. It won't help. Oh! He's talking now. Muttered in his sleep a lot. He should be comin' out of it. Might even be able to feed himself."

"Feed himself? Oh jeez," Pop whined. "He better be able to eat by himself. I'm not gonna sit here and spoon-feed him breakfast."

Cautiously, Koichi tested his limbs and was pleased to find that the majority of his usual mobility had returned. His muscles ached, but he was able to pull himself out of bed, which was a feat that had proved impossible the day before.

"You're up?!" Pop yelped, flailing her arms at the sight of Koichi awkwardly advancing on them.

"Quirk's mostly worn off." Knuckleduster grinned. "I'll be heading out, then."
"Wait," Koichi rasped, drawing nearer.

His friends hovered in place, waiting and watching him closely.

Using every ounce of strength he had, Koichi threw his arms around their shoulders and pulled them into a hug.

"Thanks, guys. I owe you."

Pop flushed and tried to squirm out of his grip, muttering about how he always said the weirdest and most embarrassing things, but Koichi held fast, only wincing a little when Knuckleduster clapped him on the back.

"No need," the older man said simply. "It's part of the job. Just be careful. You gotta hit them before they can hit you."

"Sorry for the trouble." Koichi bowed his head sheepishly.

"Don't apologize," Pop tutted. "Just don't do it again, okay? You really worried us."

"Alright, I'm out for real. Got work." Shrugging out of Koichi's reach, Knuckleduster hopped out the window and took off.

"Jeez, what is with that geezer?" Pop groaned. "Hey, you got more pudding?"

A content smile curled Koichi's lips. Change was inevitable. Hoping things would stay the same with Pop and Knuckleduster was foolish. So instead, he wished for something more practical; he wished that he'd always have room in his heart for the memories he made with them. If he managed that, it would be enough.











A Hero's Legacy

written by *Starship-Phoenix*
art collab by *firexe*

"I should call the cops on you. Don't you know it's creepy to stand outside a school?"

Only years of ingrained hero reflexes kept Iwao from jumping a foot in the air at the unexpected voice. He turned around, prepared to spin a lie about waiting to pick his daughter up from school, and saw a teenage girl looking up at him, amusement on her face.

The very girl he'd been hoping to see.

"Tiger Bunny. It's good to see you—"

"Shhh," she hissed, reaching up on her tiptoes to slap a hand over his mouth. "My name is Usagiyama Rumi. Hero name: Miruko. The person known as Tiger Bunny doesn't exist, *got it?*"

Iwao nodded, and Usagiyama took her hand off his mouth.

"Why are you here, old man?" Usagiyama asked, arms crossed. "Did you change your mind about not telling my school that you caught me fighting?" Iwao shook his head. "I just wanted to make sure you were okay."

Iwao was well aware of how an experience like what happened at the Underground Masquerade could cause trauma. If Usagiyama was concerned about him telling her school, that meant she probably didn't have anyone to talk to about it, which meant it was festering inside her with no outlet.

He dug around his pocket until he found the business card he'd stashed in there when he'd woken up from a nightmare and made the impromptu

decision to drag himself out of bed and hunt down Usagiyama's school.

"Here. Take this."

Usagiyama took the card, read it, and raised an eyebrow.

"If you ever need anything. I'm not sure what I could offer, but..."

Usagiyama slipped the card into her pocket. "I guess I should say thank you, but I don't need help. With anything, ever. I'm a lone wolf. Er... bunny. Lone rabbit?"

For a brief moment, Iwao was struck by how *young* she was. He chuckled, awkwardly patting her on the shoulder. "Well the offer stands. Try to stay out of trouble, okay?"

She smirked up at him. "No promises."



Iwao was taking his frustration out on a punching bag when the door to his gym creaked open.

"Whoa. This place is pretty neat."

Iwao put a hand out to stop the punching bag and peered around it to where the silhouette of someone stood in the doorway. Iwao didn't think Usagiyama would ever take him up on his offer. It had been a long time.

Usagiyama bounded over to the boxing ring in the middle of the room, perching herself on the rope. "So, this is your agency?"

Iwao joined Usagiyama at the boxing ring and took a swig of the half empty beer that had been keeping him company. "Technically, it's more of a private gym, but I needed an official address to be a hero. I didn't have sidekicks or assistants, so it's only an agency by the loosest definition of the word."

Usagiyama perked up, ears twitching. "You don't have sidekicks? You're a lone wolf, too?"

"I suppose some might see it that way. As you might remember, I did work with the police on occasion."

"Ohhhh right, right. Did you ever catch those bad guys?"

Memories rushed over Iwao - the kind that he'd been trying to beat out of the punching bag. A hand reaching for his face, and then afterward, the unsettling feeling of reaching for something that no longer existed.

He took another sip of beer. "Why are you here?" he asked, perhaps a little too harshly.

Usagi-yama looked suddenly sheepish, in a way Iwao didn't think she was capable of.

"I graduated. I was supposed to have a 'plan' or something. Apparently there's more to being a kickass hero than kicking ass."

"So you came here because you think I can help you?"

Usagi-yama shrugged. "I could probably get a sidekick position anywhere

*THE CEILING AND USAGIYAMA'S VICTORIOUS GRIN SPUN
ABOVE HIS HEAD.*

I wanted, but I wanted to take a different path. Figured I could get some advice from a hero I trust not to tell me to be nice, polite, gentle..." Usagi-yama took a deep breath.

Usagi-yama had only been a hero for a short time, but it looked like she was already facing some harsh truths about the business. It was probably for the best that she learned them now.

"I'm no longer a hero. I... lost my quirk."

It was the first time he'd said it out loud. The first time he'd admitted it to another person.

Usagi-yama's eyes went wide.

"So, as you may be able to guess," Iwao continued, "I'm not gonna be much help to you."

Usagiyama narrowed her eyes, one ear flicking irritably. Iwao expected her to walk away. It's what most people would do. What use was a hero who couldn't even be a hero?

"Fight me."

Iwao looked down at the fierce young woman glaring up at him, hands on her hips, eyes bright and alert and challenging. "What?"

"*Fight me*," she repeated, thumping her foot impatiently on the floor of the wrestling ring. "Unless you think you can't beat a little girl?"

Iwao considered her. As a pro hero (a *former* pro, he corrected), he had the responsibility to make sure she grew into a good hero and not the kind that washed up and ended up drinking beers in the middle of the day and putting holes in punching bags to cope. Like him.

"Alright," he relented with a sigh.

And then, with no warning, she threw herself at him.

Iwao didn't have his quirk, but he was still able to keep up with her flurry of kicks, not as outmatched as he assumed he'd be. Years of ingrained muscle reflexes meant he could duck and weave even without Overclock slowing down the world around him. Usagiyama's grin turned more feral as the fight progressed, and he thought back to the eagerness she'd displayed at the Underground Masquerade. How she'd thrown herself into danger without hesitation.

As Iwao's body blocked and threw bunches and dodged, his mind whirled. There was a reason O'Clock hadn't had sidekicks. A reason he never took on interns. So why was he so invested in making sure Usagiyama didn't throw away her future? And how could he make sure she stayed on the right track?

The answer came to him as she threw one last kick to his gut and his distracted mind was unable to catch it in time. He flew backwards, back hitting the ropes before bouncing off, hitting the floor, and rolling to a stop, face up. The ceiling and Usagiyama's victorious grin spun above his head.

"I win."

Iwao sat up with a grunt and a slight wince. "Only because I was distracted." "You're pretty strong for a guy with no quirk," she said, and though Iwao initially bristled, the look in her eyes told him it wasn't an insult. It was a reminder of who he was. Not a hero, but not helpless, either.

"I want you to have my gym."

"What?"

"You can't be a lone wolf — lone *rabbit* — without an agency. You'll need an address to be independent. It usually takes years for rookies to save up the money required to buy and maintain an office. It's why most heroes who can't rely on nepotism start off as sidekicks at larger agencies until they can break out on their own. So take the gym. You won't ever have to rely on someone else unless you want to."

Usagiyama seemed to be fighting an internal war with herself. "I don't want a handout."

"It's not pity," he said. "You beat me fair and square."

Usagiyama bit her lip. "But don't you need it?"

"I told you, I'm not a hero anymore. Can't be a hero without a quirk, which means I have no need for an agency. Just... promise me you'll take care of this place."

Usagiyama nodded solemnly. "Got it, old man. I'll keep the ring warm for you if you ever change your mind. Maybe I'll even take pity on you and hire you as my sidekick."

Iwao laughed, and realized it was the first time he'd done so since losing his quirk. He felt lighter.

He'd miss the gym, but a punching bag could be hung up anywhere. And besides, he had a family waiting for him. A wife, a daughter. People he could fully devote himself to now that there were no distractions.

O'Clock was his past, and it was time to put the past behind him. Iwao sipped from a cool beer as Koichi and Kazuho bickered back and forth about whose turn it was to do the dishes. The TV was playing footage of a recent villain attack down south.

"Pro-hero Miruko arrived on the scene and swiftly dealt with the villain using



one of her trademark kicks. When asked to comment on her recent climb up the charts, she had this to say: 'Villains had better watch their butts, because I'm gonna be kicking ass until I can't kick no more.'"

The name Miruko jolted Iwao out of his internal wager with himself on what would happen first: Kazuho confessing her obvious feelings for Koichi, or Koichi finally noticing those obvious feelings.

He'd followed Miruko's career closely over the last few years, making sure she didn't become the kind of hero who fell off the wagon entirely and ended up being the kind of person the heroes were paid to fight. The kind who took justice into their own hands, laws be damned. Like him.

It would have been so easy for someone like her to find more freedom and adrenaline in the fighting ring or back alleys. When she'd cracked the top ten not long after he gave her the keys to his gym, he'd felt a rush of pride and relief he didn't think possible.

An uncountable number of times, he'd walked to the gym to see her only to turn away at the last minute. Why should a successful hero like Miruko even want to speak to a hypocrite like him?

"Whoa, that rabbit hero is pretty cool," Koichi exclaimed.

Kazuho rolled her eyes. "You just think she's hot."

Koichi flushed and spluttered. "No I don't! Well, I mean... It's about her power! Have you seen her *jump*? I've never seen anything like it!"

Kazuho frowned. "*I can jump*," she mumbled, but Koichi didn't hear her, too busy wondering out loud if he could use his quirk to reach the same heights as her.

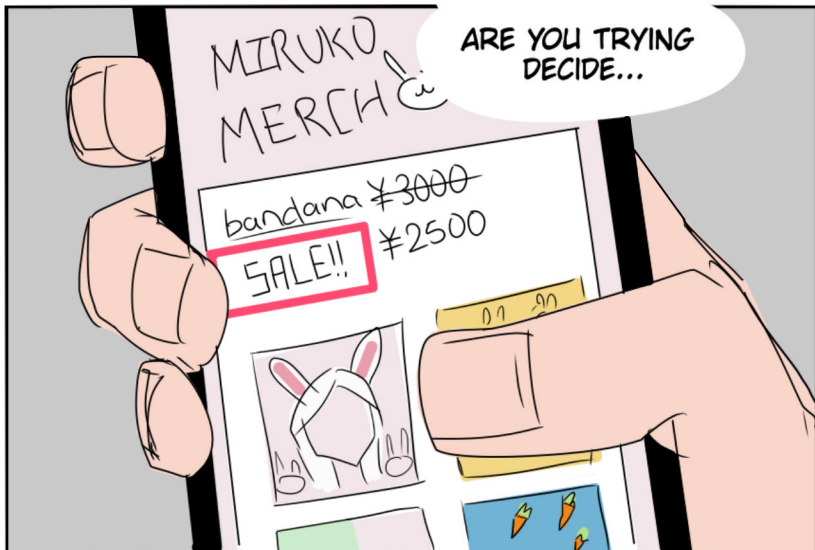
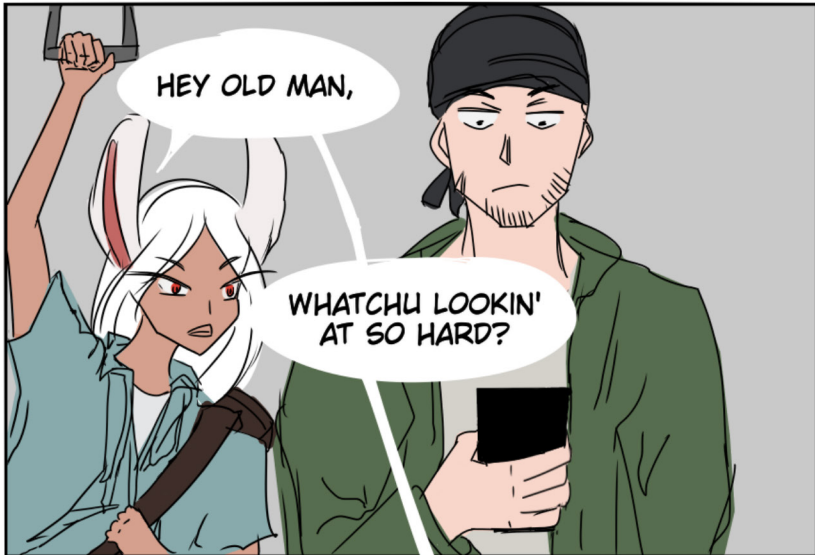
Iwao lifted his beer to his lips, hiding his smile. Iwao never set out to be a teacher, but it seemed he couldn't help getting involved in the lives of the younger generation.

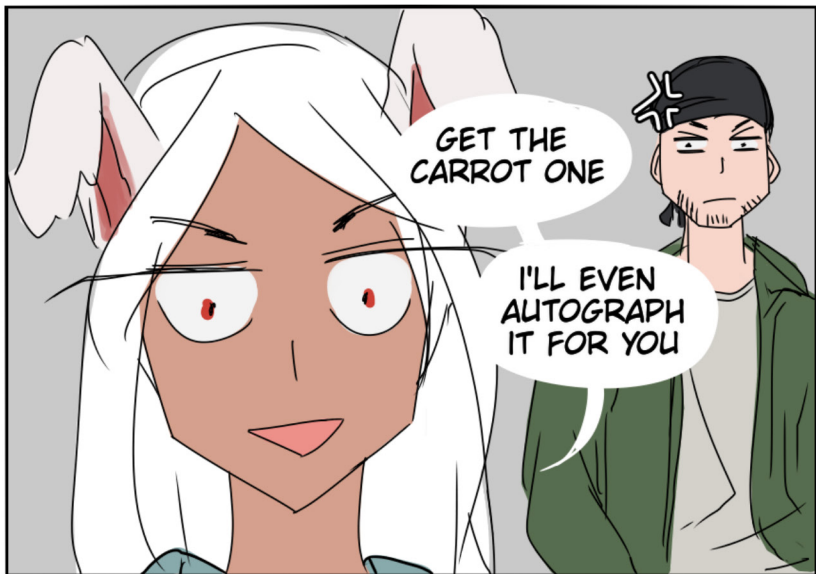
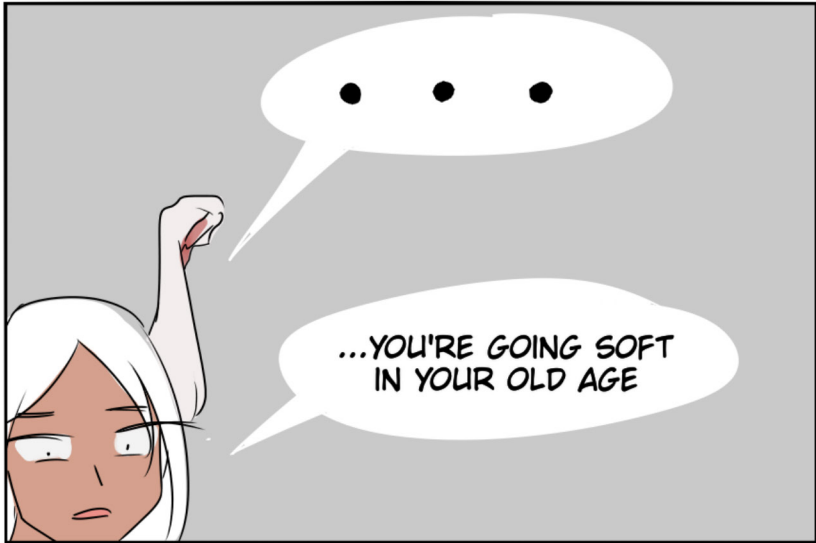
Koichi was so eager to improve his abilities it was hard not to want to help him reach his potential. He had that same drive to get stronger as Usagiyama did. They were different in almost every other way, but that was one thing they shared. The need to prove themselves.

Koichi would make a fine hero. It was a shame Iwao might not get to see it. At some point, like with Miruko, Iwao would have nothing left to offer Koichi. He'd have to learn how to spread his wings and fly.



GONE SOFT





Iwao watched the reports come in with horror. Over the last few days, the news was a seemingly endless list of the dead. At least half the country's heroes were out of commission.

The Top Ten had been decimated, though the news was keeping quiet about just how bad it was. Iwao wasn't sure if society could bounce back from the career ending injuries they'd witnessed in the heroes they'd placed their faith in or the shattering of the one prison they thought could hold back an entire nation's biggest threats.

Iwao hadn't been a hero in years, but he didn't need to still be a hero to feel the loss on a profound level. He'd lost comrades before, lost loved ones too, but nothing like this.

He knew from decades of experience that wallowing only led to depression taking hold, and he refused to go back to that hopelessness he'd felt when he lost his quirk. Unfortunately, even turning off the TV and leaving his house wasn't enough to escape the blanket of despair that had draped itself over the city.

Staying active was the only thing that could distract him, and luckily there was plenty to keep him active, these days.

He let his feet take him down backstreets, where the grief was quieter and villains louder.

He didn't realize exactly *where* his feet were taking him until it was too late, and he was standing outside an old gym, tucked away on a quiet side street and blended into the surroundings.

In all the years since he'd handed it over to Miruko, he'd always stopped himself from stepping inside. But somehow, his excuses didn't seem enough anymore.

He reached for the spare key, surprised to see it was still hidden behind a loose brick, and let himself in.

In front of him was the boxing ring, the old beat up punching bag that was decades old, and a shiny, more modern punching bag that was being pummeled into submission by someone who looked to be in severe pain but was planning to kick the punching bag until the chain broke or she died trying.

"...Usagiyama?"

The woman in question spun around. Her eyes quickly scanned for danger, and he saw the moment she recognized him and she relaxed.

"Long time no see, old man. And wow, you really *are* old now, aren't ya?"

Iwao should have been surprised at her *lack* of surprise to see him. Instead, he stared in horror at what the news had been covering up. The news had been vague on Miruko's status. He understood why, now. One of her ears was torn, one leg was in a brace, and the way she was carrying herself, it was clear she had other injuries as well. But one injury was more glaring than the others.

"Your arm..."

Rumi looked down at the stump of her arm. "Ah. Yeah." She grinned. "You should have seen it. A half dozen nomu versus one lone bunny. Managed to take a few out even after this got ripped off."

Her nonchalance about having her arm torn off by a mutated monster was mildly concerning. He wondered what ways she coped. He didn't see piles of beer cans, so that was a good sign at least.

"Are you..." Iwao stopped himself. Of course she wasn't okay. Nobody was okay these days. "How are you holding up?"

Usagiyama opened her mouth, closed it, and took a deep breath. "I was about to lie," she confessed. "Was gonna say I'm fine, nothing can keep me down, I'm the unstoppable rabbit hero Miruko, after all." She let out a shaky laugh, then looked Iwao in the eyes.

"What are you supposed to do when everyone around you says you have career ending injuries but there's still work to be done and you can't just *stop*?"

"You do the work anyway. You do what needs to be done."

"And what if I can't?"

Iwao had never seen Usagiyama so unsure of herself before. The fact that she trusted that she could be vulnerable in front of him reminded him of the day he'd given her this gym. When he confessed that he was no longer a hero, and she didn't walk away. He couldn't walk away from this conversation any more than she could, but he wasn't sure if words could reach her. If words were what she wanted in the first place.

"Fight me," Iwao said.

"What?"

"Fight me," he repeated. "Unless you think you can't beat a quirkless old man?"

Usagiyama laughed, and Iwao felt some of the tightness in his chest loosen. "Alright," Usagiyama said with a grin. "But don't think you're going to have an easy fight. I'm not going easy on you."

"I could say the same thing," Iwao said as he climbed over the rope and joined Usagiyama in the boxing ring.

The world was still broken, outside the door of the gym. The fight still raged — whatever heroes remained versus unthinkable destruction. But here and now, Iwao wasn't powerless. Here, there was something he could do.

As time passed, people had forgotten about the hero O'Clock. But his deeds as a hero were never his true legacy. The people he taught — Usagiyama, Koichi, *they* were Iwao's true legacy.

And they meant much more to him than his hero identity ever did.



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